

WATER: The Looming American Crisis

SASHA ABRAMSKY MAUDE BARLOW LAURA GOTTESDIENER

THE Nation.

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150

AUSTERITY IN RUINS

MARIA MARGARONIS
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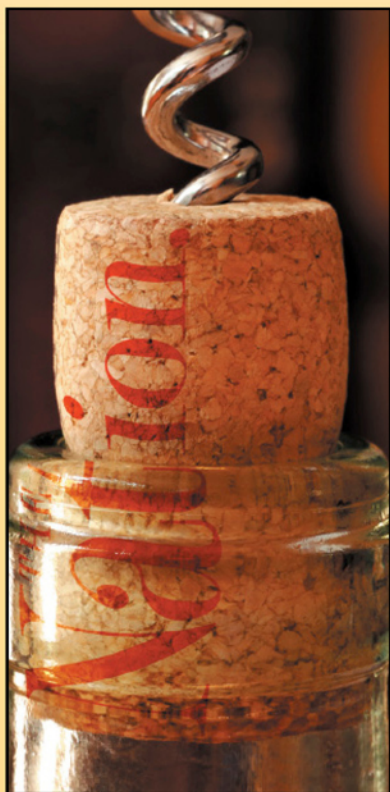


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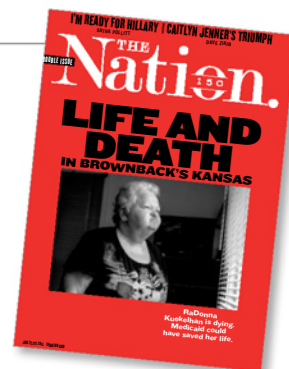
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Letters

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Ready or Not, Here She Comes?

Katha Pollitt sounds more desperate than excited when she insists, a year and a half before the election, that it's either Hillary or a Republican who will become the next president ["Ready, and Excited, for Hillary," June 22/29]. I was a Hillary supporter in 2008, when the Democratic National Committee shoved her aside in favor of a young, inexperienced freshman senator. Democrats have paid heavily for that, and they will pay heavily again if they try to snuff out the incipient candidacy of a true progressive, a former mayor (elected four times), and a member of the US Congress for 25 years. Let the campaign progress. Pollitt says that Bernie Sanders will endorse Hillary if she wins the nomination. I would hope that Hillary, and all Democrats, will support whoever becomes the Democratic nominee.

MALCOLM MITCHELL
NEW YORK CITY

In her readiness and excitement for the Clintons' return to the presidency, Katha Pollitt is welcoming the continuation of neoliberal economics, which will do more harm than good for the women of America, especially those trapped in impoverished, blighted neighborhoods.

Message for Pollitt: The choices we have include Bernie Sanders and, if you must have a woman candidate with a clear set of values, Jill Stein of the Green Party, who will likely be on the ballot. If the only thing that motivates us politically is gender and a Supreme Court nomination, then not only is the era of big government over—to quote Bill Clinton—but so is the era of *any* useful government for the people, except the wealthy elite.

DAVID E. KINGSLEY
KANSAS CITY, MO.

I can't recall the number of times over the decades this old lefty has been advised to hold his nose and vote for some business-as-usual Democrat. But it would take a hermetically sealed space suit rather than mere pinched nostrils for Hillary Clinton to get my vote.

PETE KARMAN
NEW HAVEN, CONN.

Katha Pollitt is right on target in her piece regarding Hillary's campaign for president. Men have run the world ever since Adam took a bite out of the apple, and they haven't done such a good job of it. I can't wait for Hillary to become president and show the world how the United States does things with a woman in charge.

ELAINE HENDRIE
BELLPORT, N.Y.

The Matter With Kansas

Kai Wright's article "Life and Death in Red America" [June 22/29] had me seeing red. My late grandmother was a native Kansan and probably the best example of a Christian woman I've ever known. She would have been appalled at the healthcare situation that has been allowed to develop there. I have little doubt that many of the Republicans responsible for this mess consider themselves "good Christians." The hypocrisy is enough to choke their symbolic elephant. Someday, I hope to watch as they get to explain their actions to the Lord they claim to follow.

WENDY WEIDMAN
GIG HARBOR, WASH.

Thank you, Kai Wright, for your excellent piece describing the reality of large sections of rural America in 2015. These are people with a deep pride in their self-reliance. They have always depended on their

letters@thenation.com

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Breakthrough With Iran

Iran and the P5+1 powers have signed a potentially historic agreement to limit Iran's nuclear program in exchange for the removal of economic sanctions. The accord is a victory for all who favor patient, sometimes frustrating diplomacy over those who favor confrontation, even war. But the latest battle over Iran

policy has just begun. The agreement will face ferocious opposition in Congress from neoconservative hawks, including some Democrats, and from Washington's allies in the Middle East, Israel and Saudi Arabia. President Obama will need help from Democrats in Congress, and a mobilized citizenry, to sustain a veto of the congressional war party's rejectionism.

One key question is whether the agreement will become a vehicle for transforming US-Iran relations and realigning US policy in the region, or whether it will become a new source of conflict, with endless disputes over verification and the lifting of sanctions. The complicated details of the accord and the determination of powerful players, foreign and domestic, to sabotage it increase the chances for the latter scenario. The administration and its supporters must therefore not only robustly advance the accord in Congress but put forward a broader strategic agenda on US-Iran relations. (It's also time to remove the missile-defense weapons placed in Europe under the pretense of protecting the continent from an Iranian attack, and for nations that actually have nuclear weapons to join or comply with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which Iran has always supported.)

Because of the relentless and often irrational opposition to the agreement, the administration was forced to advance it in the most defensive terms: as the best way of ensuring that Iran will not get nuclear weapons, rather than as an essential first step in a broader rapprochement that is not only in America's strategic interest, but is critical for bringing order and peace to a Middle East now falling into chaos.

That regional realignment would recognize the substantial common interests that Tehran and Washington have in countering ISIS and Al Qaeda; in pursuing a settlement of the Syrian crisis; in stabilizing

Yemen and Bahrain; and, more generally, in ending the region's Sunni-Shia sectarian proxy war. This realignment would also recognize the important role that Russia played—in spite of US hostility arising from the Ukraine crisis—in supporting the agreement. Balancing US ties with Israel and the Sunni Gulf states and better relations with Iran and Russia should strengthen America's position in the region.

If the agreement is to work as a vehicle for constructive diplomacy, its supporters will have to confront the false alarms about Iran's regional designs as well as its nuclear intentions. Already we are hearing that lifting the sanctions on Iran will give it more resources to pursue destabilizing and anti-Israel policies. But a reasonable analysis of recent Iranian actions leads to a different conclusion: namely, that the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic rests not on its revolutionary zeal, but on its ability to improve the living standards of its people; that its regional policy is based as much on defensible national interests as it is on anti-Israel fervor; that it has been a helpful partner in Afghanistan and more recently in Iraq; and that it has done more to dampen the conflict in Yemen and Bahrain than has Saudi Arabia, which has resorted to military force in violation of international law.

The Iran nuclear agreement, then, is a bold move to counter the drift toward an unsustainable double war with both Sunni extremism and Iran—and also a new Cold War with Russia, motivated in part by Moscow's support for the Assad regime in Syria. Obama's greatest legacy could still be as a peacemaker in foreign policy, but he will have to meet the challenge of not only defending the Iran agreement, but also of making the case for a broader transformation of US-Iran and regional relations. ■



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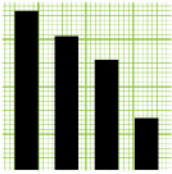
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DC BY THE
NUMBERS



\$2B

Estimated amount that Hillary Clinton will spend in the 2016 campaign

\$45M

Amount raised by Clinton so far

\$38M

Amount raised by Ted Cruz's Super PAC

\$31.9M

Amount raised by Marco Rubio's Super PAC and the nonprofit backing him

\$15M

Amount raised by Bernie Sanders's campaign so far

"The likelihood of the laws being enforced is slim."

Federal Election Commission chair Ann Ravel on the agency's ability to enforce campaign-finance law

Ideological Bankruptcy

Austerity isn't dead—but it should be.

All of the economic research that allegedly supported the austerity push has been discredited," *The New York Times's* Paul Krugman wrote in April. Need evidence? Look at Greece, where EU-imposed austerity has sent the country's GDP into a death spiral. As we go to press, the troika (the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund) is asking Greece to vote on an emergency relief package packed with even more austerity demands, including harsh spending cuts. "The Greek government," Thomas Piketty wrote at *TheNation.com*, "is being asked to put a gun to its head and pull the trigger."

Why is a failed policy being pushed on Greece, and all of Southern Europe? A hint lies in the memoir by former US treasury secretary Timothy Geithner, in which he recalls a meeting with Wolfgang Schäuble, the German finance minister who now plays a dominant role in the eurozone. Schäuble advanced the argument that "letting Greece burn" would be "traumatic enough that it would help scare the rest of Europe into giving up more sovereignty to a stronger banking and fiscal union." Greece has been pushed to the brink not to help its economy, but to show who's in charge. Confirmation of the antidemocratic nature of the EU came from Yanis Varoufakis, who represented Greece as finance minister in its first round of negotiations with the troika. When he told Schäuble that Syriza had a mandate to renegotiate punitive concessions made by previous governments, Schäuble openly scoffed. "So at that point," Varoufakis recounts, "I had to get up and say, 'Well, perhaps we should simply not hold elections anymore for indebted countries,' and there was no answer."

As Greece confronts a new round of brutal austerity measures (the alternative is leaving the eurozone), the rest of Europe is watching. "When citizens repeatedly vote for a change of policy...but are told that these matters are determined elsewhere or that they have no choice, both democracy and faith in the European project suffer," the economist Joseph Stiglitz wrote. With a Eurocrat elite in Brussels overruling the recent referendum and including in its proposals direct supervision of Greece's economic policies, even voters in well-off countries have balked. The United Kingdom is due for a vote on continued eurozone membership, and Labour politician Andy Burnham has warned "that the EU is becoming associated with a right-of-centre economic orthodoxy that is being imposed on all parts of the EU." Hundreds of thousands of people on Twitter stated their opinion on the troika more concisely: As the Greek negotiations reached their 16th hour in Brussels, #ThisIsACoup trended at No. 2 in the world, and No. 1 throughout much of the eurozone.

COMMENT

The liberal project of European integration is emerging as a coercive mechanism: one in which democracy, dignity, and sovereignty are ripped from economically weak countries for the benefit of the strong. The left should be doing some hard thinking about the eurozone and its role—if any—in a democratic Europe.

SARAH LEONARD

Waterboarding Greece

What lies ahead: existence as a zombie debt colony.

European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker called the new bailout deal that's been offered to Greece at gunpoint "a typical European arrangement." German Chancellor Angela Merkel said it was "nothing special." An unnamed eurozone official (he's been working overtime lately) described the treatment of Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras in Sunday night's marathon meetings as "extensive mental waterboarding." Welcome to Europe 2015, bastion of high culture and base cruelty.

For weeks, the Syriza government has been flailing like a bird in a cage, trying to find a way out of an impossible situation. After months of negotiation, on the verge of bankruptcy, presented with a set of measures that couldn't be put to the Greek Parliament without splitting his party, Tsipras put the creditors' offer to the voters in a referendum. Some say that he hoped for a "yes" vote to get himself off the hook—but Tsipras and his government campaigned vociferously for "no." "No" won by a small landslide: 61.3 percent.

Less than a week later, with the banks closed, imports frozen, and the economy in free fall, a proposal very close to the one the voters had rejected was pushed through Parliament. Tsipras made a speech that sounded like surrender, passing the baton on to other parties (read Sinn Féin in Ireland and Podemos in Spain). We struggled, he said, for the low-paid and for pensioners. We sparked a movement of solidarity in Europe. Surely this struggle won't have been in vain.

As this issue goes to press, the Greek Parliament is preparing to vote on yet more austerity measures—tougher than anything seen so far—to keep the country in the eurozone. As Greece gives up what remains of its sovereignty, protesters are gathering in Syntagma Square. The new memorandum includes necessary reforms, many of them part of Syriza's original program. It also crosses the party's "red lines" on pensions, value-added taxes (VAT), and labor rights, and mandates an impossible privatization program backed by the transfer of 50 billion euros of Greek assets to an independent fund—pawning the family silver pending its final sale, no doubt at knockdown prices.

Tsipras succeeded in getting this fund transferred from Luxembourg (famous for helping the wealthy pay their taxes) to Athens, and in earmarking half the proceeds to recapitalize the banks. He got an offer of funding

for three years instead of a few months, and (with many caveats) a mention of possible debt relief. Apart from a commitment to mobilize “up to” 35 billion euros for investment, there is little to sweeten this bitter pill.

Germany and its allies had a choice when they drew up the terms of surrender. Greece, though, has no choice but to accept them. Foreign commentators blithely calling for resistance and an exit from the eurozone haven’t fully imagined what that would mean for the Greeks, who have had a taste of it these past days: serious shortages of medicine, fuel, and food; the collapse of what still passes for normality; civil conflict; international isolation. Greece is a tiny country of 11 million souls, its meager and late-blooming industrial production gutted by globalization and mismanagement. As Tsipras put it in a TV interview on Tuesday, the only plan for a Grexit was that of German Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble. The government has no plan for leaving the eurozone. Some people say that they’re ready to go, that they’ve got nothing left to lose, but the majority—including those who voted “no”—have no stomach for such adventures.

Or not yet, anyway. The events of the past few days may yet change all of that. It isn’t just the implacable cruelty of the German position, or the vindictive humiliation of an elected government by its eurozone “partners.” To Greeks, none of that comes as a surprise—and judging by the popularity of #ThisIsACoup on the night of the long knives, the rest of the world now sees it too, including the right-wing forces itching to unravel the European project. It’s that the program now being imposed on Greece will fail, as surely as its previous incarnations did.

No one believes in this new deal: not Syriza, not Schäuble, not the IMF, which says it won’t participate unless Greece gets substantial debt relief. The absurdly high VAT rate—23 percent on many goods and services—will continue to crush consumption. Pension cuts will plunge more families into destitution. What lies ahead for Greece in the foreseeable future is existence as a zombie debt colony on a drip feed of life support.

In the early months of the crisis, I met a Bulgarian conjurer in a derelict building in Athens. He survived, like so many migrants, by recycling scrap metal for 17 cents a kilo. He showed me a few card tricks that took my breath away; he claimed he could earn 300 euros performing in restaurants. But he wouldn’t do it, he told me, because of the beggar masters. They take whatever you make, and if you refuse, they can bundle you up and throw you into the sea. And if you don’t make enough money, they might cut off your earlobe to make you work harder next time. It’s fear, you see, he said. Fear makes a man work harder, like an animal.

I’ve often thought since then about that man, who preferred to survive by collecting tin cans rather than live like an animal. But I don’t know what’s happening to him now.

MARIA MARGARONIS

Goldman’s Greek Gambit

It made a mint by helping to hide the country’s debt.

The Greek debt crisis offers another illustration of Wall Street’s powers of persuasion and predation, although the Street is missing from most accounts.

The crisis was exacerbated years ago by a deal with Goldman Sachs, engineered by Goldman’s current CEO, Lloyd Blankfein. Blankfein and his Goldman team helped Greece hide the true extent of its debt, and in the process almost doubled it. And just as with the American subprime crisis, and the current plight of many American cities, Wall Street’s predatory lending played an important although little-recognized role.

In 2001, Greece was looking for ways to disguise its mounting financial troubles. The Maastricht Treaty required all eurozone member states to show improvement in their public finances, but Greece was heading in the wrong direction. Then Goldman Sachs came to the rescue, arranging a secret loan of 2.8 billion euros for Greece, disguised as an off-the-books “cross-currency swap”—a complicated transaction in which Greece’s foreign-currency debt was converted into a domestic-currency obligation using a fictitious market exchange rate.

As a result, about 2 percent of Greece’s debt magically disappeared from its national accounts. Christoforos Sardelis, then head of Greece’s Public Debt Management Agency, later described the deal to Bloomberg Business as “a very sexy story between two sinners.” For its services, Goldman received a whopping 600 million euros (\$793 million), according to Spyros Papanicolaou, who took over from Sardelis in 2005. That came to about 12 percent of Goldman’s revenue from its giant trading and principal-investments unit in 2001—which posted record sales that year. The unit was run by Blankfein.

Then the deal turned sour. After the 9/11 attacks, bond yields plunged, resulting in a big loss for Greece because of the formula Goldman had used to compute the country’s debt repayments under the swap. By 2005, Greece owed almost double what it had put into the deal, pushing its off-the-books debt from 2.8 billion euros to 5.1 billion. In 2005, the deal was restructured and that 5.1 billion euros in debt locked in. Perhaps not incidentally, Mario Draghi, now head of the European Central Bank and a major player in the current Greek drama, was then managing director of Goldman’s international division.

Greece wasn’t the only sinner. Until 2008, European Union accounting rules allowed member nations to manage their debt with so-called off-market rates in swaps, pushed by Goldman and other Wall Street banks. In the late 1990s, JPMorgan enabled Italy to hide its debt by swapping currency at a favorable exchange rate, thereby committing Italy to future payments that didn’t appear on

(continued on page 8)



Europeans For Grexit?

While the Eurocrats in Brussels push austerity on Greece, what do their home voters think? We looked at recent polling for Germany and France, the two most influential eurozone countries.

51%

Germans who want a “Grexit” as of June, an 18% increase from January

45%

French who support a Grexit, although 85% do not expect Greece to pay back its loans

24%

French who approve of the way President François Hollande has handled the crisis, compared to 44% who believe German Chancellor Angela Merkel will resolve it

70%

Germans who approve of fiscal hawk Wolfgang Schäuble, the German finance minister

—Ethan Corey

STUDENT NATION

Boston U's Problem Population

In May, incoming Boston University professor Saida Grundy was attacked by conservative media over tweets referring to white males as a “problem population.” Though she later apologized for the lack of nuance in her 140-character tweets, opposition to the university’s decision to keep her as an employee remained strong.

On July 1, the white-supremacist group National Youth Front was found to have launched a #FIREGRUNDY campaign on the BU campus. The organization posted fliers in high-traffic areas around campus that proclaimed: “Black privilege means not being fired after saying that white college males are a problem population.”

Soon after, a BU spokesman said that the university’s police are investigating the posters and that BU will press charges if they make an arrest. However, students of color are more concerned that their campus is one



why is white america so reluctant to identify white college males as a problem population?

in which white supremacists feel comfortable operating. Students have cited the administration’s failure to increase black student enrollment and black faculty employment (both of which hover at around 3 percent) as a major contributor to a campus environment that supports anti-black sentiment. JAILYN GLADNEY



A portion of a flyer found on the Boston University campus.

Eric Alterman



The Real Democratic Battle

It's not Bernie vs. Hillary, as the media would have it. It's de Blasio vs. Cuomo.

The national media are focused on the battle between Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton for the so-called “soul” of the Democratic Party. This is silly: Shake a Sanders supporter long enough and she ought to be able to admit that America isn’t likely to elect as president a 73-year-old Brooklyn-born Jewish democratic socialist from Vermont. Clinton’s massive advantages in money, endorsements, name recognition, and popularity will eventually result in a landslide, irrespective of who better represents the party. What’s more, it’s an imagined argument waged over symbols rather than choices. Campaigns are about offering hypothetical solutions that will likely never be tested by reality. Contradictions and compromises are simply wished away.

In New York, however, an actual battle for the future of the party is under way, and it’s not pretty. On one side is the recently reelected governor, Andrew Cuomo. A national champion

of same-sex marriage and women’s rights, Cuomo is also a darling of the superrich who has forced through fiscal and financial policies that only a hedge-fund manager (or a campaign-finance chair) could love. To wit, he has capped property taxes, slashed the corporate tax rate, created tax-free zones for start-ups, and extracted concessions on wages and benefits from the state’s largest public-sector union—and that’s just for starters. If the future belongs to Cuomo, then the legacy of the New Deal (and, not incidentally, of his late father, Mario Cuomo) will finally become extinct. The Democrats, like the Republicans, will be a party of the wealthy for the wealthy—more specifically, the pro-choice, pro-gay-marriage, pro-immigration, and pro-science wealthy.

On the other side is New York Mayor Bill de Blasio, also a social liberal, who has focused on tackling the city’s inequality crisis. Almost alone among elected Democrats, he has argued for (slightly) higher taxes on the wealthy (in this case, to fund universal pre-K); has passed paid-sick-leave legislation and a limited living-wage executive order; and is fighting for a \$15 minimum wage in the city, among many other initiatives. But most of his plans have been frustrated by resistance in Albany. This is the case even when such measures would cost the state nothing. (Cuomo likens his opposition to the

city’s now-defunct “millionaire’s tax” to—I swear I’m not making this up—his father’s principled and politically costly opposition to the death penalty.)

Together with Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, de Blasio has become a high-profile spokesperson for the Democrats’ ideal of economic liberalism. But unlike the two senators, who are working within a recalcitrant, Republican-controlled Congress, de Blasio enjoys actual (albeit limited) executive authority over a vast bureaucratic apparatus—one that requires him to make distasteful deal after distasteful deal to advance his anti-inequality agenda.

Because so many of the mayor’s priorities require Albany’s approval, de Blasio chose to play patsy for Cuomo—sometimes even his punching bag—in the hopes of winning at least a nonaggression pact on economic matters. De Blasio knew that his ambitious agenda demanded it, however much his ego may have recoiled. This frustrated local progres-

sives, whose hatred of Cuomo is boundless, but it made sense in the context of the relationship and helped the mayor make inroads in Albany during his first year in office.

Following Cuomo’s reelection last year, however, the tenuous peace fell apart. Cuomo went out of his way to mock and insult progressives, particularly the Working Families Party, which nominated him on the basis of promises that de Blasio thought he had secured from the governor. Ignoring his pledge to help win Democratic control of the State Senate, Cuomo worked to elect a Republican legislature, undermining the candidates of his own party (and especially those affiliated with the WFP). He returned to Albany weakened in the midst of multiple corruption scandals and then purposely and cynically batted down every one of de Blasio’s proposals, particularly those advancing the mayor’s two key priorities: affordable housing and early education.

Cuomo went out of his way to mock progressives and worked to elect a Republican legislature, undermining the candidates of his own party.



"WICKEDLY ENTERTAINING."

The directors avoid picking sides and instead enjoy the show."

— KYLE SMITH, NEW YORK POST

"A MADCAP INTELLECTUAL ROMP. LIVELY AND FASCINATING."

— AVISHAY ARTSY, KCRW

"HILARIOUS AND THRILLING."

— KRISTIN MCCRAKCKEN, THE HUFFINGTON POST

"THE BEST DOC AT SUNDANCE."

It rivetingly retraces how one heated rivalry sparked an entire culture of punditry."

— DAVID EHRLICH, TIME OUT NEW YORK

"RIVETING."

— NINA BURLEIGH, NEWSWEEK

"Media history geeks,
CHRISTMAS IS ABOUT TO COME EARLY."

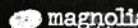
— DAVID FEAR, ROLLING STONE

BEST OF ENEMIES



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10 DEBATES.
TELEVISION
WOULD NEVER
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ONLY IN THEATERS JULY 31

In political terms, the battlefield is much larger than New York. It's long past time that progressives noticed this and joined the struggle.

Barely bothering to conceal his identity, he also offered background quotes to journalists in which he delighted in screwing the mayor.

As the awful legislative session ended, de Blasio summoned reporters and unloaded on the governor—and he did so on the record. He accused Cuomo of caring only for “his own sense of strategies, his own political machinations,” and of engaging in vendettas “if someone disagrees with him openly.” Cuomo, de Blasio insisted, had no interest in “getting things done for the people of this city and, in many cases, the people of this state.” Rather, he was motivated by “deal-making” and “revenge.”

Locally, many politicians have rallied around de Blasio out of hatred for Cuomo’s high-handedness, although the tabloid media have predictably seized on the personality conflict between the two. (The fact that both are Italian men makes this even easier.) The substantive issue that

will define the future of the Democratic Party, however, remains largely buried. Put simply, the question is this: In an age of essentially unlimited money power, just how much of the party’s policies are for sale to the highest bidder? Despite the compromises that de Blasio has been forced to make with the powerful constituencies that define what is politically possible, his priorities are consistent with those of rank-and-file Democrats and with the economic interests of 99 percent of Americans. Cuomo can get away with what he does, however, because he has the money men (and women) behind him, and the structure of state and local politics gives him the upper hand operationally. But in political terms, the battlefield is much larger than New York. It’s long past time that progressives noticed this and joined the struggle. The people who rely on liberals and progressives to fight for them do not need symbols; they need real change. ■

(continued from page 5)

its national accounts as future liabilities.

But Greece was in the worst shape, and Goldman was the biggest enabler. Undoubtedly, Greece suffers from years of corruption and tax avoidance by its wealthy. But Goldman wasn’t an innocent bystander: It padded its profits by leveraging Greece to the hilt—along with much of the rest of the global economy. Other Wall Street banks did the same. When the bubble burst, all that leveraging pulled the world economy to its knees.

Even with the global economy reeling from Wall Street’s excesses, Goldman offered Greece another gimmick. In early November 2009, three months before the country’s debt crisis became global news, a Goldman team proposed a financial instrument that would push the debt from Greece’s healthcare system far into the future. This time, though, Greece didn’t bite.

As we know, Wall Street got bailed out by American taxpayers. And in subsequent years, the banks became profitable again and repaid their bailout loans. Bank shares have gone through the roof. Goldman’s were trading at \$53 a share in November 2008; they’re now worth over \$200. Executives at Goldman and other Wall Street banks have enjoyed huge pay packages and promotions. Blankfein, now Goldman’s CEO, raked in \$24 million last year alone.

Meanwhile, the people of Greece struggle to buy medicine and food.

There are analogies here in America, beginning with the predatory loans made by Goldman, other big banks, and the financial companies they were allied with in the years

leading up to the bust. Today, even as the bankers vacation in the Hamptons, millions of Americans continue to struggle with the aftershock of the financial crisis in terms of lost jobs, savings, and homes.

Meanwhile, cities and states across America have been forced to cut essential services because they’re trapped in similar deals sold to them by Wall Street banks. Many of these deals have involved swaps analogous to the ones Goldman sold the Greek government. And much like the assurances it made to the Greek government, Goldman and other banks assured the municipalities that the swaps would let them borrow more cheaply than if they relied on traditional fixed-rate bonds—while downplaying the risks they faced. Then, as interest rates plunged and the swaps turned out to cost far more, Goldman and the other banks refused to let the municipalities refinance without paying hefty fees to terminate the deals.

Three years ago, the Detroit Water Department had to pay Goldman and other banks penalties totaling \$547 million to terminate costly interest-rate swaps. Forty percent of Detroit’s water bills still go to paying off the penalty. Residents of Detroit whose water has been shut off because they can’t pay have no idea that Goldman and other big banks are responsible. Likewise, the Chicago school system—whose budget is already cut to the bone—must pay over \$200 million in termination penalties on a Wall Street deal that had Chicago schools paying \$36 million a year in interest-rate swaps.

A deal involving interest-rate swaps that Goldman struck with Oakland, California,

more than a decade ago has ended up costing the city about \$4 million a year, but Goldman has refused to allow Oakland out of the contract unless it ponies up a \$16 million termination fee—prompting the city council to pass a resolution to boycott Goldman. When confronted at a shareholder meeting about it, Blankfein explained that it was against shareholder interests to tear up a valid contract.

Goldman Sachs and the other giant Wall Street banks are masterful at selling complex deals by exaggerating their benefits and minimizing their costs and risks. That’s how they earn giant fees. When a client gets into trouble—whether that client is an American homeowner, a US city, or Greece—Goldman ducks and hides behind legal formalities and shareholder interests.

Borrowers that get into trouble are rarely blameless, of course: They spent too much, and were gullible or stupid enough to buy Goldman’s pitches. Greece brought on its own problems, as did many American homeowners and municipalities.

But in all of these cases, Goldman knew very well what it was doing. It knew more about the real risks and costs of the deals it proposed than those who accepted them. “It is an issue of morality,” said the shareholder at the Goldman meeting where Oakland came up. Exactly.

ROBERT B. REICH

Robert B. Reich, a former secretary of labor, is the Chancellor’s Professor of Public Policy at the University of California, Berkeley, and the author of Beyond Outrage. His award-winning film, Inequality for All, is available on Netflix and other video-streaming services as well as on DVD.

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The Pillow Was the Problem

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Mike Lindell
Inventor of MyPillow®

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Lindell has been featured on numerous talk shows, including *Fox Business News* and *Imus in the Morning*. Lindell and MyPillow have also appeared in feature stories in *The New York Times* and the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*. MyPillow has received the coveted "Q Star Award" for Product Concept of the Year from QVC, and has been selected as the Official Pillow of the National Sleep Foundation.

MyPillow's patented technology can help with all of the most common causes of sleep loss and allows you to adjust it to any sleeping position. You can even wash and dry MyPillow as easily as your favorite pair of blue jeans!



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- Jacqueline H.



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Michael J. Lindell

Michael J. Lindell
CEO, MyPillow, Inc.

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NEW MEDIA

The Scalawag's South

A new magazine has launched in the South, a suspiciously attractive quarterly called *Scalawag*. “A lot of people have a sense that the South is up for grabs,” co-founding editor Jesse Williams tells *The Nation*. The first issue features all kinds of contention over the region’s legacy and future: coverage of Black Lives Matter, policing, the midterms in North Carolina, Moral Mondays, an unblinking history of the racist ancestor uncovered by an amateur historian, and a profile of an old-time fiddle player.

The magazine is meant to represent a diverse and progressive South, a gap in Southern publishing that irked its

young founders. (Sarah Bufkin and Evan Walker-Wells are the other co-founding editors.)

“The word ‘scalawag’ has a history down South,” Williams explains. “It originally referred to native Southerners who supported Reconstruction, and later to folks who joined the civil-rights movement. It’s got such a great ring to it, and we wanted to reclaim the term for our own generation: both to recall those older Southern traditions of activism, and to help us remember that, then as now, dissent can be a kind of loyalty.”

The magazine used a Kickstarter campaign to put out its first issue, and it’s now collecting subscriptions online. The hardest part of putting out that inaugural issue wasn’t the editing or imagining a new voice for the South—it was “getting folks to contribute time and talent to a publication that didn’t exist yet.” Now that they’ve done it, there are just a few things missing. Williams confesses that he would have liked Zora Neale Hurston as a columnist, and “Mark Twain would put ‘The Borowitz Report’ to shame.”

—Sarah Leonard

Patricia J. Williams



Telling Differences

A dangerous criminal, or a desperately sick and homeless man?

I spent July 4 at a social-justice retreat in rural Washington State, driving up into the mountains with a group of colleagues through spectacularly picturesque small towns bright with fluttering red, white, and blue banners.

“There’s a wonderful general store here,” one of my friends told me as we pulled in for gas along the way. “You’ll love the place and its genuine old-fashioned charm.” I like old-fashioned as much as the next, so while the rest of the company peeled off to get pizza, I puttered my way across the road and pushed open the creaky wood-frame door to the friendly sound of jangling sleigh bells hung from the knob.

The reception inside, however, didn’t match that warm, silvery welcome. A little girl of about 5 or 6 who’d been coloring on the floor looked up. I smiled; she scowled, gathered her crayons, and huffed over to her mother. The mom, who was doing what looked like accounting at a round oak table, glanced at me, frowned, and refused to make eye contact. There was another woman behind the counter who eyed me with such apparent hostility that I almost turned and left on the spot. But then I thought, “I’m projecting. They’re having a bad day—it has nothing to do with me.”

So I put my head down and wandered around, looking for the charm rather than the chill of an earlier era. “Excuse me, please,” I asked the woman monitoring the cash register, feeling that careful politeness might warm things a bit. “Do you have ice cream?”

“Yer looking at it,” she snarled without moving. Flushed with humiliation and feeling accused somehow, I scuttled sideways toward the exit. Just then, one of my friends walked into the store. “Hello, mister,” piped up the little girl cheerfully. Then another of the party came in. “How can I help you, sir?” asked the woman behind the counter. As my friends and the cashier engaged in a somewhat giddily suggestive discussion of various sausages, I slipped out quickly and retreated to the car.

It’s hard to figure out exactly what accounts for the difference in our experience. I’m an old, gray black woman; my friends were younger white men.

I felt it had to do with race, but it could have been age, or gender, or something random. It wasn’t like they were flying the Confederate flag.

There’s just no way to know, we told ourselves. We moved on to other things.

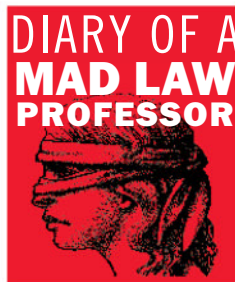
Wending our way along the mountain roads, we traveled through terrain not so different from that of Pasco, just on the other side of the Cascades. Pasco was the scene of a police shooting early this year that has left Washington State bitterly divided. Last February, Antonio Zambrano-Montes, a migrant farmworker from Mexico who’d apparently

taken an ample dose of amphetamines, went on a rock-throwing spree in downtown Pasco during rush hour. Cellphone videos taken by bystanders reveal him in a state of considerable incoherence and distress: weaving off balance, running in circles, flinging rocks and gravel at cars, passersby, police. The images show the police first trying to tase him, then shooting at him. Zambrano-Montes runs across

the street to the front of a busy supermarket, three officers in pursuit. The police shoot again, this time a larger volley. He falls to the sidewalk, and they circle his body for a few moments before handcuffing his limp arms behind his back.

On July 1, the last of a series of documents was released in connection with a much-delayed follow-up report on the shooting. Included were eight videos, each taken from a slightly different angle, all available for public viewing on YouTube; from no perspective does it appear that anyone deserved to die. Zambrano-Montes was guilty of obstreperous (if fairly ordinary) disorderly conduct. But what’s most astonishing about the encounter—which took four minutes from beginning to end—was the utter lack of police discipline: a Wild West rampage on a public street during rush hour. Seventeen bullets were fired in all. As many as seven entered

I felt it had to do with race, but it could’ve been age, or gender, or something random. It wasn’t like they were flying the Confederate flag.



Zambrano-Montes's body. Six more were retrieved from the walls of the supermarket, a gas station, and a vending machine. Four were never found.

If I personally find it hard to imagine what might justify such a response, the statements from the officers and some witnesses tell a radically different story. "He was willing to do anything he could to get me to shoot him," said Officer Adrian Alaniz. "He wanted to die," said someone who knew Zambrano-Montes at the local homeless shelter. According to one bystander, he looked like a "caged tiger." Police told investigators that they consider rocks to be deadly weapons—"one rock can kill you"—and that it was "a life-and-death" situation. When asked why they decided to fire on a man who was running away from them, Officer Ryan Flanagan explained: "I wasn't chasing him down to shoot and kill him. But he wasn't going to get away, either."

Flanagan resigned from the force about two weeks before the report's release. The county coroner has called for an inquest, but that won't start until September at the earliest. As of this writing, there has been no decision on whether to bring charges against any of the officers. Franklin County prosecutor Shawn Sant has stated that the final decision on whether the shooting was justified "would not come soon."

It's hard to figure out what accounts for such differences in perspective. But as long as we live in a culture with such aggressively policed boundaries of social division—whether age, gender, race, accent, or class—our individual experiences at the general store of our humanity will always be at odds. What manifestation has just come lurching through the opened door: a lady or a tiger? Is there really just no way to know? ■



We know
#Greece needs
debt relief.
#Schauble knows
Greece needs
debt relief. Who
decides when to
break the rules?

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margaronis,
Nation writer Maria
Margaronis

SNAPSHOT/MARKO DROBNJAKOVIC

Remembering Srebrenica

A woman mourns at the grave site of a family member on the 20th anniversary of the Srebrenica massacre. Beginning on July 11, 1995, the Serbian military executed approximately 8,000 Muslim men and boys in the town of Srebrenica, which international courts have condemned as genocide.



AP

BACK ISSUES/1948

The Greek Guinea Pig

In March 1948, as civil war raged in Greece between communist insurgents and the US-backed army, *The Nation* republished an editorial that had run in a Greek Socialist Party weekly before its editors were imprisoned for "creating dissension among the Greek people." The article took issue with an American congressional report on the dim prospects for economic recovery while the civil war continued in Greece. "The magic wand that would mobilize the creative forces of Greece is to be found neither in the 'personal initiative' demanded in the report nor in the inept leadership denounced by it," the editorial said. "It is to be found in the restoration of normal conditions and democracy."

Only intervention by outsiders stood in the way: "Since the United States has proved incapable of alleviating the evil,



why does it insist on continuing its present policy? In whose interest, may we ask?...Is Greece, then, a guinea pig? A guinea pig in whom the effect of American aid will be studied before it is offered to other countries...?

"Who is going to worry about Greece?" the editors continued. "About the 'stable' political situation that must be created, the 'acute inflation' threatening us, the decrease in our exports, the shrinkage of our production, the rise in prices, and the profiteering of a small clique?... Who will care about these things? Who ever cares about the fate of a guinea pig?"

—Richard Kreitner

Calvin Trillin
Deadline Poet

REPUBLICAN CONTENDERS AND IMMIGRATION

They talked about immigrants sort of in code
That signaled the nativist crowd.

The code is now broken with Trump on the scene.
A loudmouth will say things out loud.

—The Nation.—

THE WATER CRISIS COMES HOME

Thanks to growing inequality, climate change, and the mismanagement of natural resources, the world's water crisis has finally reached the Global North.

by MAUDE BARLOW



THE UNITED NATIONS REPORTS THAT WE HAVE 15 YEARS TO avert a full-blown water crisis and that, by 2030, demand for water will outstrip supply by 40 percent. Five hundred renowned scientists brought together by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said that our collective abuse of water has caused the earth to enter a “new geologic age,” a “planetary transformation” akin to the retreat of the glaciers more than 11,000 years ago. Already, they reported, a majority of the world’s population lives within a 30-mile radius of water sources that are badly stressed or running out.

For a long time, we in the Global North, especially North America and Europe, have seen the growing water crisis as an issue of the Global South. Certainly, the grim UN statistics on those without access to water and sanitation have referred mostly to poor countries in Africa, Latin America, and large parts of Asia. Heartbreaking images of children dying of waterborne disease have always seemed to come from the slums of Nairobi, Kolkata, or La Paz. Similarly, the worst stories of water pollution and shortages have originated in the densely populated areas of the South.

But as this issue of *The Nation* shows us, the global water crisis is just that—global—in every sense of the word. A deadly combination of growing inequality, climate change, rising water prices, and mismanagement of water sources in the North has suddenly put the world on a more even footing.

There is now a Third World in the First World. Growing poverty in rich countries has created an underclass that cannot pay rising water rates. As reported by Circle of Blue, the price of water in 30 major US cities is rising faster than most other household staples—41 percent since 2010, with no end in sight. As a result, increasing numbers cannot pay their water bills, and cutoffs are growing across the country. Inner-city Detroit reminds me more of the slums of Bogotá than the North American cities of my childhood.

Historic poverty and unemployment in Europe have also put millions at risk. Caught between unaffordable rising water rates and the imposition of European-wide austerity measures, thousands of families in Spain, Portugal, and Greece have had their water service cut off. An employee of the water utility Veolia Eau was fired for refusing to cut supplies to 1,000 families in Avignon, France.

As in the Global South, the trend of privatizing water services has placed an added burden on the poor of the North. Food and Water Watch and other organizations have clearly documented that the rates for water and sewer services rise dramatically with privatization. Unlike government water agencies, corporate-run water services must make a profit for their involvement.

And, as in the Global South, aging pipes and leaking water systems are not being repaired or upgraded by Northern municipalities, which have become increasingly cash-strapped as public funds dry up. It is estimated that the United States needs to spend \$1 trillion over the next twenty-five years for water infrastructure. To pay for this in a time of tax-cutting hysteria, it is likely that the burden will fall on families and small businesses, pushing water rates even higher.

Climate change is another equalizing phenomenon. Melting glaciers, warming watersheds, and chaotic weather patterns are upsetting the water cycle everywhere. Higher temperatures increase the amount of moisture that evapo-

rates from land and water; a warmer atmosphere then releases more precipitation in areas already prone to flooding and less in areas prone to drought. Indeed, drought is intensifying in many parts of the world, and deserts are growing in more than 100 countries.

Additionally, the relentless over-extraction of groundwater and water from rivers has caused great damage in the Global South and is now doing the same in the North. A June 2015 NASA study found that 21 of the world’s 37 largest aquifers—in locations from India and China to the United States and France—have passed their sustainability tipping points, putting hundreds of millions at risk. Stunningly, more than half the rivers in China have disappeared since 1990. Asia’s Aral Sea and Africa’s Lake Chad—once the fourth- and sixth-largest lakes in the world, respectively—have all but dried up due to unremitting use for export-oriented crop irrigation.

In Brazil, almost 2 trillion gallons of water are extracted every year to produce sugarcane ethanol. Cutting down the Amazon rain forests has dramatically reduced the amount of rain in the hydrologic cycle. Healthy rain forests produce massive amounts of moisture that are carried on air currents called “flying rivers” and supply rain to São Paulo thousands of miles away. The destruction of the rain forests and groundwater mining for biofuels has created a killing drought in a country once considered the most water-rich in the world. Not surprisingly, large-scale cutoffs and water rationing are taking a toll on millions of poor Brazilians.

The story repeats itself in the North. According to the US Department of Agriculture, the Ogallala Aquifer is so overburdened that it “is going to run out...beyond reasonable argument.” The use of bore-well technology to draw precious groundwater for the production of water-intensive corn ethanol is a large part of this story. For decades, California has massively engineered its water systems through pipelines, canals, and aqueducts so that a small number of powerful farmers in places like the Central Valley can produce water-intensive crops for export. Over-extraction is also putting huge pressure on the Great Lakes, whose receding shorelines tell the story.

**We need
to change
our
relationship
to water,
and we
need to
do this
quickly.**

Maude Barlow, who chairs the boards of Food and Water Watch and the Council of Canadians, served as senior adviser on water to the 63rd president of the UN General Assembly. Her latest book is Blue Future: Protecting Water for People and the Planet Forever.

THERE IS SOME GOOD NEWS ALONG WITH these distressing reports. An organized international movement has come together to fight for water justice, both globally and at the grassroots level. It has fought fiercely against privatization, with extraordinary results: Europe’s Transnational Institute reports that in the last 15 years, 235 municipalities in 37 countries have brought their water services back under public control after having tried various forms of privatization. In the United States alone, activists have reversed 58 water-privatization schemes.

This movement has also successfully fought for UN recognition that water and sanitation are human rights. The General Assembly adopted a resolution recognizing these rights on July 28, 2010, and the Human Rights

Council adopted a further resolution outlining the obligations of governments two months later.

Working with communities in the Global South, where water tables are being destroyed to provide boutique water for export, North American water-justice activists have set up bottled-water-free campuses across the United States and Canada. They have also joined hands to fight water-destructive industries such as fracking here and open-pit mining in Latin America and Africa.

The most important defining feature of this movement is that it is based on solidarity. The same mix of issues confronts the Global North and South alike, and it's only through respect and the sharing of resources, tactics, and information that we will bring water justice to communities around the world. Water activists increasingly understand that many of the assaults target indigenous lands, and that indigenous leadership and solidarity are key to the success of this movement.

It has now become time for governments around the world to step up and take serious action. It is utterly astonishing to me that, with the many (and growing) water crises across the United States, the issue of water does not come up in presidential campaigns. Energy, yes—water, no.

We humans have used the planet's fresh water for our pleasure and profit, and created an industrial model of development based on conquering nature. It is time to see water as the essential element of an ecosystem that gives life to us all, and that we must protect with vigor and determination. We need to change our relationship to water, and do it quickly. We must do everything in our power to heal and restore the planet's watersheds and waterways.

In practice, this means we need a new ethic that puts water and its protection at the center of all of the laws and policies we enact. The world would be a very different place if we always asked how our water practices—everything from trading across borders to growing food and producing energy—affect our most valuable resource.

Water must be much more equitably shared, and governments must guarantee access by making it a public service provided on a not-for-profit basis. The human right to water must become a reality everywhere. Likewise, water plunder must end: Governments need to stand up to the powerful industries, private interests, and bad practices destroying water all over the world. Water everywhere must be declared a public trust, to be protected and managed for the public good. This includes placing priorities on access to limited supplies, especially groundwater, and banning private industry from owning or controlling it. Water, in short, must be recognized as the common heritage of humanity and of future generations.

The global water crisis now unites us in a common struggle. Will its scarcity lead to conflict, violence, and war? Or is it possible that water will become a negotiating tool for cooperation and peace? Can it be nature's gift to teach us how to better live with one another and tread more lightly on Mother Earth?

I surely hope so. ■

LIFE *on*

by SASHA ABRAMSKY

For many Californians, the drought

T

HE TINY, DUSTY TOWN OF Fairmead, California, feels a long way from anywhere. It's the kind of place where people come to start anew, hoping to silence the ghosts of hard times past. There are the

African-Americans whose families migrated out of the segregated Deep South more than half a century ago, looking for farmwork and a place where they could hold their heads high. There are the migrants from Mexico, who came in search of a slightly better life than the one they had left south of the border. There are the Anglo descendants of refugees from the Oklahoma Dust Bowl. And there are elderly adventurers looking for something new—for a little land and a lot of quiet in which to live out their fixed-income retirements.

Fairmead is unincorporated. It used to have a mill, a library, a hotel, and a small store, as well as a handful of restaurants. None of these remain. Located a few miles from the prison town of Chowchilla, Fairmead today has a *Last Picture Show* feel to it. It boasts a small elementary school, a Head Start program, a couple of churches, and a population of roughly 1,400, spread out along miles of rural back roads. The town's avenues are numbered instead of named—some of them paved, others simply bumpy lanes of gravel and stone. They stretch out from what passes for the town center—a few neat streets lined by bungalows and ranch houses, with a city well and a recently built water-storage tank at its heart—into the orchards beyond.

These days, while the almond orchards are kept a perfect green, the surrounding landscape is a dull brown, and the yards in front of most of the houses are little more than dirt and weeds. At least 25 families have seen their wells go dry in recent months. Many others are rationing what little water remains. Those lucky enough to be on the city's system still have to strictly conserve to keep the town's only well from going dry.

Not that they want to use any more of the city's water than they absolutely have to: The water quality is so bad in Fairmead, where tap water flows a milky white, that even those on the city well prefer to drink bottled water. Mostly low-income, they spend tens or even hundreds of dollars



LOS ANGELES TIMES

PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL ROBINSON CHÁVEZ

the WRONG SIDE *of the* DROUGHT

is an inconvenience. But for countless poor, rural residents, it means a struggle to survive without water.



The Great Thirst:
In East Porterville,
where many of the
wells have gone
dry, a woman lugs
bottles of water to her
neighbors.

each month on drinking water, and many dollars more on gas to drive their cars out of town to someplace where the water quality is better, so that they can fill up large containers with safe water to use for showering, washing dishes, and watering their gardens.

Flossie Ford-Hedrington, a longtime grape and cotton picker—like many of her neighbors, she says she started picking as a little girl—is one of those without water. She lives in a tumbledown house, with a ripped-canvas roof and several boarded-up windows, on Avenue 18½ on the edge of an almond orchard. Behind the main house is a mobile home, antiquated, wounded, the crooked wooden walls long ago having given up any pretense at symmetry. Next to it is her little well, which stopped producing water last year. “It’s a big change,” she says. “There’s no faucets to turn on, honey. I cry. Because I don’t have nothing.”

Ford-Hedrington came here at the age of 6, when her family migrated from Louisiana. Now 59, she is hobbled by severe asthma—a common complaint in California’s dusty, hyper-polluted Central Valley—as well as high blood pressure and stomach problems. On the day I met her, she had just gotten out of the hospital. Yet each day, Ford-Hedrington has to walk a mile down the street to her neighbor’s house when she needs water. Then, somehow, despite her frailty, she has to lug a five-gallon jug back home.

Ailing and prematurely aged, Ford-Hedrington looks as though she would struggle to lift a drinking bottle, let alone a full five-gallon container. Still, she does it. “I say—*God* say—yes, I could,” she announces fiercely. And then she huffs and puffs theatrically, flexing her wasting arm muscles to illustrate her daily struggle with the water jug. “I got to walk,” she adds. “My car’s broke.” She holds the jug first with her left arm, then with her right. And she shuffles—ever so slowly. “I keep on going. I stop and I rest.” The odyssey takes her more than half an hour each way. If she has clothes to wash, she also has to drag a heavy laundry bag to her neighbors’ at the same time.



The end of water: Flossie Ford-Hedrington stands by her well, which stopped producing water last year.

“**E**VERY YEAR,” SAYS PROFESSOR JAY LUND of the University of California at Davis’s Center for Watershed Sciences, “California has a worse drought than most of the United States has ever seen. Look at how dry it is from April to October. If you had a drought like this in the East, it’s unimaginable.” And that’s not in a bad year, mind you, but in a typical, nothing-to-write-home-about year.

In a normal year, California gets most of its freshwater supplies from a handful of big storms in the fall and winter—storms that fill the lowland reservoirs and, more important, dump large amounts of snow on the majestic Sierra Nevada mountain range, where the water waits, frozen, until it is slowly released during the melting season. Those few, precious storms generate enough water to allow California’s tens of millions of residents to drink water as they please, to take showers and flush toilets, to wash cars, water lawns, and fill swimming pools. They allow oil firms to frack, golf courses to remain verdant, and farmers to grow crops. They allow, in short, the miracle of a hydrologic civilization, perched between desert and ocean, to flourish—and to do so with utter abandon.

Every California resident uses between 150 and 200

gallons of water per day, Lund estimates. That is roughly five times what residents in sun-parched Israel use; it is far more, too, than what Australians, Spaniards, or residents of other hot, dry, sunny countries consume. Californians live on land a few failed storms away from desiccation, but historically they’ve consumed water as if they lived in Vermont or New York or any other saturated East Coast state.

But these past four years have been far from normal for Californians, as the big rain-and-snow dumps have failed to come through. And while the last seven months did bring considerable rain to much of the northern parts of the state, it hasn’t been enough to compensate for the fact that the vital accumulations of snow high up in the Sierras failed to materialize, or to replenish groundwater systems sucked dry by the arid years. When Governor Jerry Brown visited the mountainous high country in the early spring, just before announcing mandatory 25 percent water-conservation measures for nonagricultural uses, the snowpack was at a dismal 6 percent of where it would normally be at that time of year.

By then, 52 of California’s 58 counties were experiencing extreme drought conditions (the number has since climbed to 54). And despite the broader economy’s recovery from the 2008 collapse, some two dozen rural counties saw significant increases in joblessness, as agricultural workers and the employees of other local businesses reliant on regular water supplies, from carpet cleaners to car detailers, were laid off because of the lack of water.

The figures are worrying. California agriculture, worth more than \$40 billion in a good year, contracted by roughly \$1.5 billion last year, as farmers plowed up crops they could no longer water and focused their efforts on preserving their most profitable harvests. Yet it was the farmhands who planted and picked the crops, trimmed the trees, and packaged fruit who suffered most. In a July 2014 report, researchers from UC Davis estimated that 17,000 seasonal and part-time jobs would be lost that year in California due to the drought. And 2015 promises to be at least as bad.

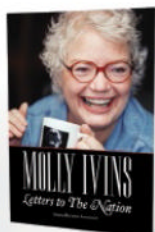
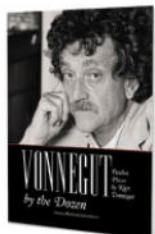
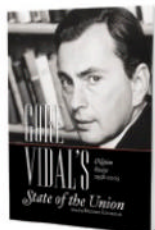
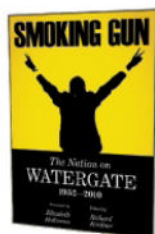
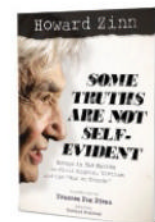
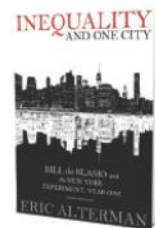
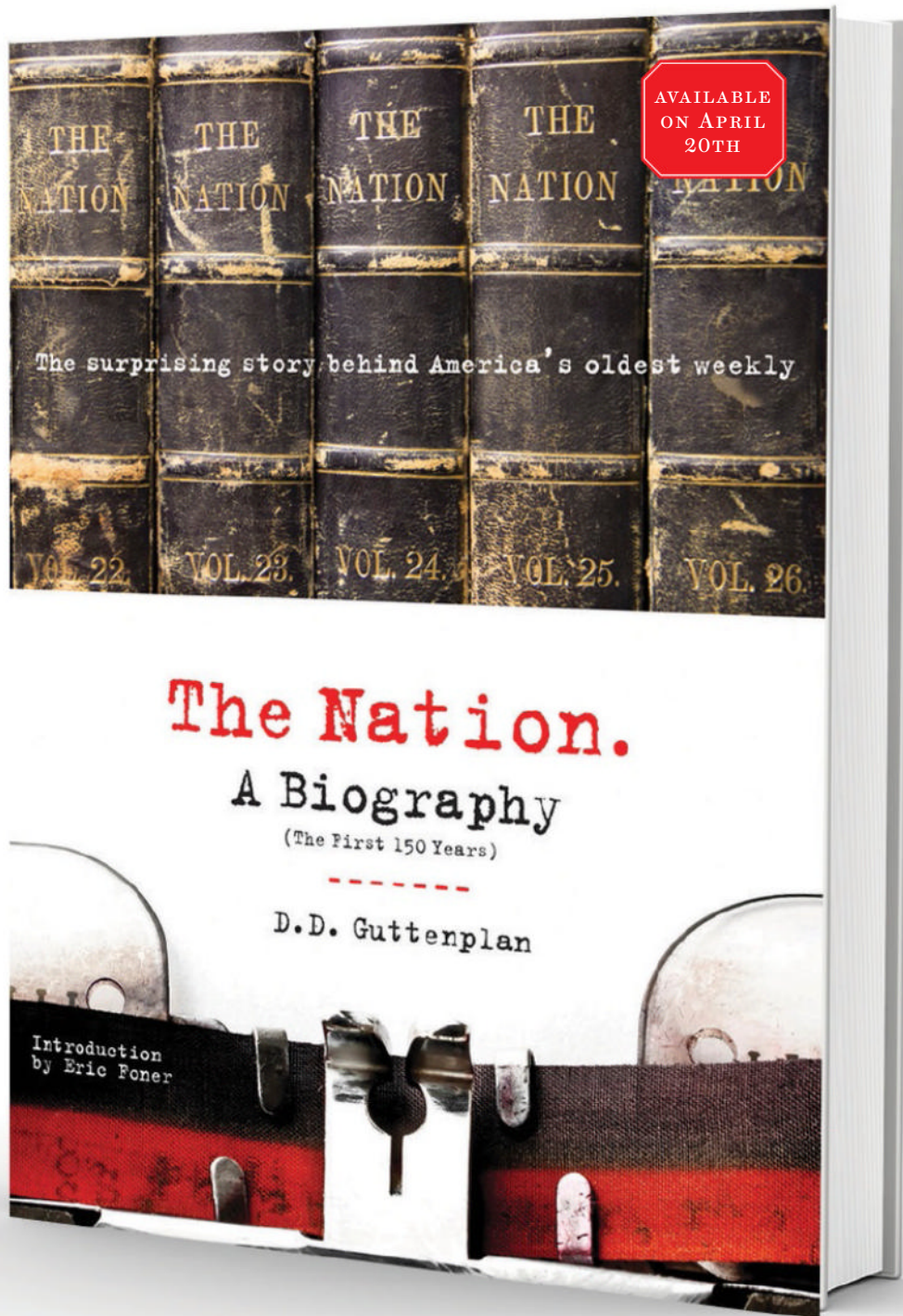
In Kern County alone, at the southern end of the Central Valley, the Bakersfield food bank has been distributing drought-relief nutrition to hungry residents in 12 communities. Between May 2014 and March 2015, according to Ken White, the group’s executive director, his team gave out more than 125,000 boxes of food.

On the days that the food bank’s truck is scheduled to arrive in the impoverished town of Arvin, hungry farm laborers and their families—most speaking Spanish, some the indigenous languages of Oaxaca and other southern Mexican states—line up for hours at a small VFW post. I visited during a rainstorm, a rare break in the drought. But despite the heavy rain, hundreds of men, women, and children were lined up, waiting for their food. It was a dismal scene, like a Dorothea Lange photograph come to life.

Before this happened, says Roberto Ricardez, 35, standing in line in his blue jeans and tan work boots, there were weeks when he could work up to 65 hours, picking cherries and making good money. Now he’s down to about 40

Californians live on land a few failed storms away from desiccation, but they have consumed water as if they were living in Vermont.

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hours a week and earning minimum wage. “Before, I’d take my daughters out to eat. Now I can only buy them the necessities,” he explains. Ricardez and most of his neighbors come to the food pantry each month. Those meager boxes of pasta, canned vegetables, and overripe peaches are all that stand between them and hunger.

OVER THE MONTHS AHEAD, CALIFORNIA’S WATER DISTRICTS WILL have to come up with extraordinary ways to make residents conserve anywhere from 8 to 36 percent of the amount of water they used in 2013, for a cumulative nonagricultural-water saving of 25 percent. For consumers in wealthy cities, this means a set of inconveniences: strict limits on when lawns can be watered, and for how long; cars buffed to a shiny perfection less often; toilets flushed according to the rules of that corny old jingle, “If it’s yellow, let it mellow; if it’s brown, flush it down.” It means the introduction of water meters in cities where residents have long enjoyed cheap, one-size-fits-all rate plans. And it means that some people who flout the rules by overusing water will have irate neighbors inform on them and be forced to pay fines.

Yet for most cities, the drought doesn’t mean calamity; the great majority of California’s urban hubs have the resources to buy water from elsewhere, and many have already stockpiled sufficient supplies to see them through several more years of drought. “Urban areas were very well prepared,” explains Professor Lund. “After the 1988–92 drought, they invested a lot of money getting ready for the next drought.”

For less wealthy communities, however, the inconveniences quickly turn into catastrophes. In hundreds of poor rural spots—places too small to qualify as towns, too isolated to be incorporated into larger cities, and oftentimes condemned as “nonviable” by their county’s General Plan—the drought has literally meant the end of water. These settlements have long been at the mercy of ramshackle delivery systems, which pump unsafe water laced with arsenic, uranium, nitrates, and pesticides into family homes; now those wells are dry, too. And despite the passage of the state’s largely aspirational Human Right to Water Act in 2012, the large-scale investments needed to link these communities into the water systems of bigger towns, or to dig wells deep enough to allow them to survive off their own water supplies, haven’t materialized.

In East Porterville, where the entire city has run dry, hundreds of families now rely on trucked-in water. Journalists have poured into town in recent months, lured by the headline of a city without water. But East Porterville is, in fact, only the tip of the iceberg. Smaller, more invisible settlements throughout the great farming valleys of California are in crisis—many from a lack of water, but also from a loss of jobs.

In Orange Center, on the southern outskirts of Fresno, the lack of water simply highlights all of the other social inequities that afflict these small satellite communities. Many of the houses are in terrible condition, their lots filled with rusting shells of old cars and electrical appliances. Some of the streets are known to be dangerous, the domain of people involved in illicit economic activity

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they heat
a little
water on
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Sasha Abramsky writes regularly for The Nation. He is the author of The American Way of Poverty: How the Other Half Still Lives (Nation Books) and the upcoming family memoir, The House of Twenty Thousand Books.

who would rather remain as far off the grid as possible. Others have residents who have long avoided involvement with the city, fearing that they would end up being burdened with utility bills they’d have no way of paying, but who now are desperate for the city’s water pipes to snake out to their parched lots.

“We just woke up, and there was no water,” says Caroline Rosiles, 53, who lives with her husband, one of their sons, two of their grandchildren, a niece, a parrot, and several dogs in a tiny house on an unpaved road a quarter-mile south of the city. Last year, her well—dug only to about 90 feet—ran dry. Now she spends hundreds of dollars a month buying nonpotable water that she stores in a 2,500-gallon tank, and roughly \$100 a month more doing her family’s laundry in a city laundromat. For drinking water, she relies on donations from an organization called Self Help Enterprises, which works to bring safe supplies to impoverished communities throughout the region.

Rosiles resents the persimmon farmer who recently moved in next door, dug deep wells that sucked up the remaining groundwater, and then told her that she and her family should find somewhere else to live. He wants her land, she suspects, wants to dig wells deeper than the ones she can afford, and—drought be damned—plant more crops. She doesn’t resent farmers in general; they make the land beautiful, she says, especially when the peach trees near her home start blossoming pink in spring. But she does bemoan the lack of limits on their water use—the implicit notion that those with the deepest pockets have the right to outdrill their neighbors and monopolize the increasingly scarce resource.

“He tells us we should move out of here, because he wants to put in more trees,” Rosiles says. “I tell him he can shove it up his ass. This is my home.” And yet she fears that her family is living on borrowed time. Two of her children moved away. She suspects that her grandchildren will want out, too, when they grow up. The land is failing: In addition to drying up wells, the drought has also caused the land to sink, as groundwater levels fall and salination of the remaining water increases. Now the economies in many of these agricultural regions are crumbling, as jobs in industries tied to high water usage evaporate.

“It’s really exacerbating a lot of the fundamental problems we have in water management and water access in California,” says Laurel Firestone, co-executive director of the Visalia-based Community Water Center.

THE STATE KNOWS IT HAS A PROBLEM. In 2014, the Brown administration released an ambitious Water Action Plan, specifying the need for significant public investment in infrastructure. Later that same year, voters backed up this call to action by passing a \$7.5 billion water bond. Along the way, the state’s Water Resources Control Board, part of the California Environmental Protection Agency, commissioned studies examining ways to get safe water into these commu-

nities. The board has also released several million dollars in emergency infrastructure funding.

These measures have helped in some communities. When the dried-up wells in Cameron Creek started collapsing, Self Help Enterprises convinced the nearby town of Farmersville to apply for grant money from the state and the US Department of Agriculture to extend its water-supply system there. The organization then worked to expedite the environmental-approval process and the project's implementation, and it even helped residents pay to hook up their houses to the new water pipes.

Earlier this spring, to the joy of locals like Rick Overby, 53, who lives with his wife in a blue mobile home, water once again began to flow from the taps. "Other than my God, there's nothing more important than water," says Overby. "Gold? You can't drink gold."

But for many other places, the investments have yet to materialize, and time is running out. Even with the lobbying efforts of Self Help Enterprises, as well as several million dollars in funding, the soonest that a place like Orange Center can be linked to Fresno's water system is in the summer of 2016, with some estimates putting that date farther off, to 2017. And even then, not all Orange Center households will be linked to the water supply.

Meanwhile, as thousands of California's poorest residents struggle to survive without water, agribusiness has been rushing to grab what water supplies remain. Throughout the drought, the acreage devoted to water-intensive crops such as almonds has soared. By the end of 2014, according to National Agricultural Statistics Services data, the land used for almond production stood at a little over 1 million acres—an increase of about 200,000 acres since 2008. During the worst drought in California's recorded history, in other words, the amount of land devoted to one of the state's most water-intensive crops went up almost 25 percent. The numbers are similar for other water-intensive but profitable crops.

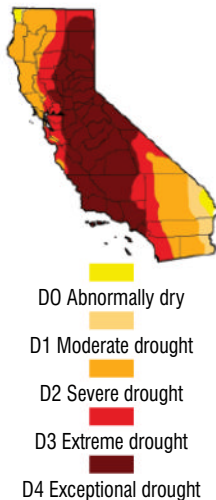
For small family farms, like the 120-acre plot in Fairmead run by Elaine Moore and her husband, almonds represent relatively easy money. Over the past 50 years, Moore, 67, has planted everything from sweet potatoes to cotton, alfalfa to raisin grapes. For her, small farming is the "mystic side of life," especially the extraordinary beauty of trees bursting with blossoms in the spring and dripping with gorgeously colored leaves in the fall. When the floor fell out of the price of raisins a few years back, Moore recalls, "it just about broke our backs. We decided to do almonds. It's our eighth year in almonds—a lot less work."

Yet over the last four years, one well after another on the Moores' small plot has run dry. A well they recently had drilled to nearly 600 feet, at a cost of over \$20,000, is still pumping water, but she doesn't know for how long.

Meanwhile, huge almond concerns are buying up vast tracts of land, sinking ever-deeper wells at ever-higher costs, and sucking up the reachable water supplies. In Monson, a 41-home settlement in Tulare County, locals talk of a large agribusiness concern near their dry hamlet

that has drilled a well, at enormous expense, down to a level of 1,500 feet. There are rumors that some other new wells probe down half a mile.

Golden State in crisis: In May 2015, fierce and unrelenting drought conditions spread like wildfire across California.



IN HIS CLASSIC 1996 BOOK *EVERYBODY LOVES a Good Drought*, the Indian journalist P. Sainath wrote that droughts tend to be suffered by the poor "when available water resources are colonised by the powerful." Earlier struggles over water pitted villages, castes, and classes against one another, led to vast internal migrations, and frequently cost the poor the little plots of land that they had farmed for generations. It was, Sainath wrote, an "invisible agony."

Today, in California—the richest state in the richest country on Earth—thousands of forgotten residents have to forage for water in ways not that dissimilar to those of the impoverished Indian peasants depicted in Sainath's book. Many of the agricultural workers who harvest highly profitable, water-intensive crops such as almonds return home after work to houses with no running water, no safe drinking water, and not even a drop that they can use to irrigate their own vegetable gardens.

I spoke to a young woman, Maria, in Fairmead, who can't give her newborn a daily bath; instead, she tries to keep the infant clean with baby wipes. She lives with her parents, José and Puresa, who shower only twice a week and collect the runoff to use on their fruit trees. The family eats from paper plates because they can no longer wash their dishes. With eight people in the house, they limit their use of the toilet to at most eight flushes per day.

In Monson, I encountered Laura Garcia, who lives with her husband and their four children. With no functional well on her rental property, her landlord has installed a big blue porta-potty near the kids' basketball hoop in the yard. Inside the house, the flush toilet sits, unusable. For drinking water, they rely on the dozens of bottles brought by the county; for showers, they heat a little water on the stove, put it into a bucket, and dump it over their heads.

In Fairmead, I met a widowed retiree, Lois Lee Davidson, who lives on a small plot of land sandwiched between the railway lines and the freeway. She has resided there for over 30 years, the last 10 of them by herself. When Davidson's well went bone-dry, she rented space—at the rate of \$600 per month—in a nearby trailer park just so she could take morning showers (she has since given up that space due to the cost). Scared of using up her water to wash dishes, Davidson had, by the spring of 2015, stopped cooking and instead started heating up store-bought meals in a microwave. Each pot of coffee she made had to last her two days.

"I never in my wildest dreams thought I'd be without water," Davidson says in wonder. "We used to have the best water in the county."

This is California in the year 2015. This is the fate of tens of thousands of people who have been left to scrounge for water in a land of lush orchards, rolling golf courses, and enormous swimming pools. And it could be the fate of millions of other Americans if the country doesn't confront the bleak reality of what happens when we consume a vital—and increasingly scarce—resource with utter abandon.

Successfully grappling with America's ever-growing need for water will require a Herculean effort—a mix of vision, determination, and, above all,

action. How can we preserve plentiful water supplies for ordinary people in the face of soaring demands for water by agribusiness, the oil industry, and other core parts of the economy? How can we protect freshwater supplies in an era of climate change, weather extremes, and rising sea levels? How do we ensure that arid parts of the country—states such as Texas and California, which have seen their populations soar over the past half century—can continue to meet the needs of everyday life?

We have confronted such ecological and infrastructure challenges before, repairing the devastated High Plains of the Dust Bowl era and providing rural electrification programs in the 1930s through the Tennessee Valley Authority, to name just two examples. With a comparable political will, we can—and must—tackle the growing water challenges of this century, ensuring that the residents of modest little towns like Fairmead and Monson have adequate access to our most basic and vital resource.

This country has heating-assistance programs to help people who cannot otherwise pay their heating bills; we have food stamps to put meals on the table of those who might otherwise go hungry. But we have no national plans in place to give water-purchasing grants to the poor in parched regions of the country. Nor do we have any easy-to-access, state-funded programs whereby individuals like Flossie Ford-Hedrington or Caroline Rosiles can obtain grants or zero-interest loans to make it possible for them to drill deep wells on their land. These are all partial fixes that would be affordable and immediate in their impact, and they would make existing, but small-bore, federal and state programs more effective.

The US Department of Agriculture, for instance, does provide Emergency Community Water Assistance Grants, which, in conjunction with state-sponsored emergency grants, fund roughly 20 projects in California. But the department caps its grants at \$500,000 per project—far shy of what many small communities need to beef up their water infrastructure. And while California recently moved toward mandating that water districts come up with long-term sustainability plans, these limits—once proposed—won't kick in for decades. In the meantime, there are no restrictions on how much water big agricultural combines can monopolize during a drought.

For the state's forgotten inhabitants, like Irma Rodriguez, 43, a nurse who lives with her husband and six children in Orange Center, the options are limited. Since her own well ran dry, Rodriguez drives to and from her mother's house each day to collect water, making sure it's correctly divided into separate pots for flushing toilets, cooking, drinking, and showers. The circuit takes up to three hours, she estimates, but what other choice does she have? "People who live here don't have the money to put in a down payment and move to an apartment or home downtown. This is their lives; their friends are here."

Rodriguez pauses, pondering her predicament. "We need water to live, to survive," she says. "You can't just ignore these rural communities." ■

THE WATER BE

As Detroit shuts down service to thousands of families, activists have turned the city into the center of a new water-justice movement.

by LAURA
GOTTESDIENER



ON THE MORNING OF JULY 3, AS DOZENS OF PEOPLE flocked to the center of Detroit to begin a seven-day, 70-mile walk from the Motor City to Flint, Michigan, Mona Stonefish, an indigenous elder with gray-streaked hair, blessed the group with the Anishinaabe water song. "If there's no water, our children will not survive," Stonefish said before breaking into song, keeping the beat by shaking a gum container filled with coins.

The group had gathered in front of City Hall in downtown Detroit, and all around them, the business district was revving to life. Young transplants were sipping coffee nearby, while employees from Quicken Loans, a mortgage-lending company whose owner, Dan Gilbert, is driving much of the city's targeted gentrification, breezed to work. Here, it seemed, was a city experiencing an economic revival. Yet just outside this sliver of city, as many as 25,000 Detroit families were facing the threat of having their water turned off for lack of payment.

"When our water is under attack, what do we do?" shouted community organizer Monica Lewis-Patrick. "Stand up! Fight back!" people responded.

The crowd began to surge northward, as marchers took the first steps in a weeklong journey to demand clean, affordable water—not only for Detroit residents, but for people throughout Michigan and the states beyond.

The march, which harked back to this country's long history of civil-rights treks, was the latest push by a band of Detroiters who have been literally thirsting for justice. Over the last year, as the city has waged an unprecedented campaign to shut off water to residents over unpaid bills, these activists have turned Detroit into the epicenter of a growing national struggle over whether water constitutes a human right. This struggle began in the spring of 2014, when a private company contracted by the city began abruptly turning off the water to up to 900 homes a day. At the time, nearly half of Detroit's residents were behind on their bills—the result of the increasingly unaffordable costs of utilities in a city where nearly 40 percent of the

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LONGS TO THE PEOPLE



population lives in poverty. Within months, more than 30,000 households were without water, sparking a public-health crisis, condemnation from the United Nations, and a surging struggle to ensure that access to clean, affordable water becomes a legally recognized right in the United States.

The rise of Detroit's water movement comes none too soon. One year after the wave of disconnections began, the threat of mass shutoffs has spread to Baltimore, while the climate-related drought in California has forced the government to institute water-use restrictions. From coast to coast, the United States is careening into an age of widespread water instability. And once again, as so many times before, the Motor City is on the front lines of the resistance.

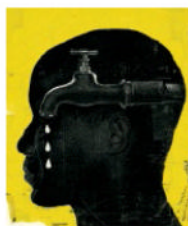
THE FIRST SHOT IN DETROIT'S WATER WAR WAS FIRED IN the early-morning hours of May 16, 2014, when Detroit resident Charity Hicks spotted a large truck emblazoned with the word HOMRICH rumbling down her block. A longtime activist, Hicks knew exactly what the private company was up to: It was there to cut off the water. She dashed down the block knocking on doors, urging people to fill up their bathtubs, sinks, and water bottles until, in the street in front of her pregnant neighbor's home, she encountered the contractor. He was impatient, and when Hicks demanded that he give the woman a few minutes to prepare for the shutoff, the man threw the truck in reverse and ran into her. When the police arrived, they arrested Hicks instead of the driver and transported her to a state-run prison.

Word of Hicks's arrest spread quickly, and the story, later recounted by organizers Monica Lewis-Patrick and Tawana Petty, sparked a swift mobilization. "Within 24 hours, I attended six meetings," Lewis-Patrick recalls.

Hicks's stand thrust the water disconnections into the spotlight, galvanizing the city's grassroots networks. Disparate groups of residents, lawyers, artists, and activists began flocking to the People's Water Board, a coalition that advocates for "access, protection, and conservation of water." Within weeks, hundreds of people packed the meetings. The group We the People of Detroit, which Lewis-Patrick works with, established a rapid-response water-delivery system. A team of lawyers, spearheaded by the formidable litigator Alice Jennings, began to draft a temporary injunction to force the city to stop cutting off the water.

Meanwhile, the number of shutoffs accelerated. One of the people threatened was Roslyn E. Walker, a longtime resident of the city's east side. Known to friends as Dee Dee, Walker is an in-home care aide who describes herself as nosy, although the truth is that she's just an old-school Detroit neighbor—willing to get up in your business if someone's health or well-being requires it.

Walker's 12-year-old son, Aldontez, has acute asthma and sometimes needs a nebulizer to help him breathe. This machine, in turn, requires water. Walker borrowed \$300 to avoid a service shutoff. Then she began placing calls, looking for help with her nearly \$600 bill. Through the grapevine, she heard about Jennings's lawsuit, signed on as a plaintiff, and then called a half-dozen friends and relatives in search of more people to testify. She learned that her cousin, Nicole Cannon, had a water bill of more than \$3,000 and convinced her to join the suit.



TAPPED OUT

The average monthly water rate in major US cities:

\$326	Atlanta
\$310	Seattle
\$260	San Francisco
\$209	Santa Fe
\$186	Boston
\$158	Baltimore
\$153	New York
\$139	Detroit and Indianapolis
\$97	San Antonio
\$73	Milwaukee
\$49	Fresno

As Jennings and her legal team prepared the case, residents moved to enact a more immediate moratorium: On July 11, nearly a dozen people entered the Homrich parking lot, assembled near the massive trucks, and refused to move. Seven days later, as more than 1,000 medical providers and residents marched through the streets, decrying what the president of the nurses' union had called "a dangerous public-health crisis," nine more people blocked the trucks with their bodies until the police hauled them away.

As the crisis spread, the city came together. Residents began snaking water hoses from house to house. School principals opened locker rooms early to allow students to shower, while parents pitched in to wash children's clothes in the schools' washers and dryers. At night, teams of people—including some former water department workers—slipped through neighborhoods with long metal rods and turned families' water back on. Freshly spray-painted declarations on walls and vacant buildings proclaimed: **THE WATER BELONGS TO THE PEOPLE.**

Throughout the summer, donations and calls of support flooded in from across the country, and caravans loaded with water arrived from Canada and West Virginia. Detroit's water shutoffs were no longer just the isolated burden of a struggling city but had become an international symbol of the need for government to check the destruction that accompanies economic collapse. Affordability, not austerity, was the rallying cry.

It was an ideological battle that had already raged in Detroit for decades, as the city weathered mass foreclosures, layoffs, pension cuts, and school closings. But the city's move to turn off the tap united Detroit's activist community like nothing in recent history—and after Charity Hicks died suddenly in an accident in New York, many redoubled their efforts. Come fall, even the soaring Highland Park water tower would bear the message—**FREE THE WATER**—in massive letters.

On July 21, Jennings's team rushed to court to file a temporary restraining order, arguing that her clients faced irreparable harm if the shutoff regimen continued. At the time, the city was under state-declared emergency management and in the throes of protracted bankruptcy negotiations. It was unclear whether the lawyers would even be allowed to file a lawsuit; there was a hold at the time on non-bankruptcy-related cases. When they appeared in court, "the defendants were just flabbergasted," Jennings recalled.

A media frenzy ensued, and hours later, the city announced a halt to the shutoffs.

DETROIT'S IDENTITY HAS ALWAYS BEEN tied to water. The city's name, meaning "strait," originated with French settlers marveling at the way the Detroit River slices through the land-mass that later became the United States and Canada. To the Anishinaabe nation, the region is known as ZagaajibiiSing: "the place that sticks out of the river."

Geographically, downtown Detroit hugs the banks of the Detroit River, which empties into Lake St. Clair on the one side and Lake Erie on the other. Farther east is Lake Ontario, while to the northwest lie Lake Huron and Lake Michigan, curled around the mitten-shaped state, and then the expansive Lake Superior. Combined, the Great Lakes hold more than 20 percent of the world's fresh water.

Yet over the last two decades, residents have found water increasingly inaccessible. The struggle actually began in the mid-1990s, when Maureen Taylor and Marian Kramer of the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization met with the concerned mayor of Highland Park, who turned over a stack of pages filled with the addresses of homes where the water had already been turned off or soon would be. Now in her 60s, Taylor is a woman with such a sense of urgency that she recounts past events in the present tense. The problem, she explained, was that the water department had been doubling and tripling the rates as Highland Park's population plummeted from more than 50,000 residents to fewer than 20,000. In response, she and Kramer had launched a series of marches and demonstrations and a boycott of the water department itself, with residents refusing to pay their bills until the rates were reduced.

But just as Highland Park was backing off from its policy of aggressive service disconnections, the crisis spread to Detroit. In the early 2000s, the city began carrying out tens of thousands of water shutoffs. "It is just madness," Taylor says of that first round of disconnections. "Factories are closing all over Detroit. People are leaving.... The tax problems are starting to creep up. Everything is falling at the same time."

Over the next few years, Michigan Welfare Rights pulled together a team of advocates, lawyers, and residents living without water to draft an affordability plan. The plan was approved by the City Council, but the water department has so far refused to implement it. Still, that early battle prepared the organizers for the spring of 2014, when Michigan Welfare Rights received another list of planned shutoffs—this time with nearly 60,000 addresses.

IN SEPTEMBER 2014, ALICE JENNINGS, ROSLYN WALKER, and over two dozen lawyers and plaintiffs arrived at the Theodore Levin US Courthouse for the opening arguments of the lawsuit demanding a temporary restraining order to stop the disconnections. By this time, nearly 20,000 households had seen their water turned off. An estimated 5,000 families were without service at that very moment.

Nicole Cannon, Roslyn Walker's cousin, arrived with an oxygen tank. She was battling sarcoidosis, an autoimmune disease that affects the lungs and other organs. Before Cannon rose to testify, Jennings asked if she was sure that she wanted to speak. "I wouldn't miss this for anything in the world," Jennings recalls her saying.

At the end of the proceedings, Judge Steven Rhodes rejected the request for a temporary restraining order, ruling that Detroit residents "do not have a right to water service, they do not have the right to water based on the ability to pay." The shutoffs resumed.

The ruling sparked outrage—not just in Detroit but internationally. Only days earlier, the United Nations had announced a fact-finding mission to the city to determine whether the scale of



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the disconnections violated international human-rights law. To quell the fervor, Detroit promoted a payment plan for residents who were behind on their water bills. Thousands flocked to the water department to sign up, but the city's scheme was so disastrously designed that, six months later, an exposé by investigative reporter Curt Guyette showed that of the more than 24,000 people who enrolled in the program, fewer than 300 were current on their bills.

Meanwhile, residents began mobilizing to enforce the right to water themselves: canvassing neighborhoods, establishing an emergency water hotline, and delivering thousands of gallons to families whose service had been shut off. One of the leaders of this effort was Monica Lewis-Patrick. As she and the rest of the volunteers crisscrossed the city, they found that some people had been living for months—even years—without water.

On one rainy afternoon, Lewis-Patrick arrived at the home of an elderly man who had just returned from the hospital. His utilities had been off for three years, he explained, so he'd been paying a neighbor to bring him water every few days. She handed him a flier and offered to set up a regular delivery to his house. But before she could finish, a younger man came out onto his porch and called across the street: "Hey, G, I've got water!"

Many of the parents that the organizers encountered were terrified that Child Protective Services would remove their children because of the lack of water. This fear was pervasive—and not without justification. Documents on initial child-removal proceedings are not public, but a *Nation* review of hundreds of appellate-level cases found more than two dozen instances statewide in which utility shutoffs were a factor in the state's decision to remove children. These include almost a dozen cases in which there were no allegations of abuse, and the lack of utilities was one of the main reasons for removal



**Once again,
as so many
times
before, the
Motor City
is on the
front lines
of the
resistance.**

The Nation's
coverage of the
US water crisis
continues at the
TheNation.com
with articles by
Sarah Goodyear,
Curt Guyette, and
James Kelly.

grades to aging water and sewer infrastructure. Panelist Roger Colton, a leading economist from Boston, highlighted numerous cities in which poor residents were being asked to pay 10 to 15 percent of their income for water and sewerage.

Piecemeal assistance programs rarely met the needs of these families, Colton explained. Instead, the only model that truly works is a citywide affordability plan, in which water bills are calibrated so as to never exceed a certain percentage of a ratepayer's income (as opposed to billing everyone at the same rate, regardless of income, and then allowing people to apply for small amounts of financial assistance—for which they may not even qualify). Other cities, he noted, including Philadelphia, have already embraced promising affordability plans.

Detroit activists have begun working toward precisely this goal. For decades, the city had its own water department, which had been wrested from local control in the previous year's heated bankruptcy negotiations. The move had sparked an intense backlash among Detroit residents, but now the water-justice advocates decided to turn the shake-up into an opportunity. Led by organizer Sylvia Orduño, the People's Water Board Coalition has begun pushing the newly created regional water authority to adopt an affordability program similar to the one that Michigan Welfare Rights developed a decade earlier.

Meanwhile, on the legal front, Alice Jennings is appealing the ruling against her class-action lawsuit against the water shutoffs, and she hopes that a victory will help to establish an enforceable civil right to water in the United States. As she awaits a court date, the evidence continues to mount that the shutoffs have caused irreparable harm: Nicole Cannon, one of the lawsuit's key plaintiffs, died in January at the age of 44.

Cannon's last months had been agonizing, as she struggled to save her water service—and her life. She'd entered into the city's payment plan, only to find that her fixed income made it impossible to keep up with the terms. On her doctor's advice, she had been trying to move, because her rental bungalow was filled with mold that exacerbated her sarcoidosis, but she couldn't because she was unable to transfer her Section 8 rent subsidy to another apartment while she still had \$3,000 outstanding on her water bill. And she had to keep the water on—both for her own health, and because if the service was cut, she would lose her Section 8 subsidy.

Ultimately, Cannon passed away. Her death was sudden and surprising, even to her three children. Not a single local newspaper ran an obituary.

"Because she was low income, because she was disabled and low income, because she was a woman, disabled and low income, she had to fight to stay alive," Maureen Taylor wrote in an e-mail to organizers in the days following Cannon's death. "Now what? Who pays for this murder, the first of probably more to come? How much longer will this treachery go on? Sleep well, Ms. Nicole." ■

IN DECEMBER 2014, JUST TWO MONTHS AFTER UN OFFICIALS DECLARED that Detroit was violating international human-rights law, the city ramped up its mass shutoffs. Donna, who asked to be identified only by her first name, watched the Homrich contractors arrive at her house early one December morning. She didn't qualify for any of the city's assistance programs because she had no income. Instead, she relied on Lewis-Patrick's delivery program and a strict rationing system.

"Instead of being able to wash your face or brush your teeth on a regular basis," she explained, "you conserve water for the important hygiene. It's more important to wash your hands after you go to the bathroom.... But if I know I haven't brushed my teeth in two weeks, and I'm going out for some type of errand, I'll brush my teeth so I'm not offending someone."

As the months stretched on and Donna's water remained off, Detroit organizers set their sights outside the city limits. In February, Alice Jennings joined a four-person team of experts to testify at a congressional panel in Washington on the growing water emergency nationwide. "Detroit, Michigan, is experiencing a humanitarian and public-health crisis," she began. "Over 53,000 Detroiters...have had their water and sewerage abruptly terminated."

As the panel revealed, the crisis extended far beyond the Motor City. The director of the US Conference of Mayors testified that municipal budgets across the country were buckling under the cost of the necessary up-

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Letters

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(continued from page 2)

family, extended family, neighbors, and community. Federal government? Stay home in Washington, DC.

I expected you to mention something about the number of babies being born at home and the return of the (so-called) coat-hanger abortion. Conservative rural Kansas, welcome back to the "good old days."

KEN JONES
FITCHBURG, MASS.

Your article on people in southeast Kansas who can't afford healthcare says, "Everyone is convinced that someone else is getting a better deal... by gaming the system." In fact, there *are* people getting a better deal—not by gaming the system but by creating it. These are the rich people and corporations whose taxes have been slashed as drastically as the funds for Medicaid and other essential services.

LINDA SLEFFEL
COLUMBUS, OHIO

Resurrecting Berryman

I was reading *The Nation's* 150th-anniversary issue [April 6] recently, and there, on page 196, was a "Dream Song" by John Berryman.

When I took a humanities course with him at the University of Minnesota in 1957, he somehow got the idea that I actually knew something about literature. At the close of class on a Friday, he handed me a sheaf of papers and said, "Here, take these home and read them and tell me Monday if you think they're any good."

So I did, and of course it was way over my head (as many things still are). I put them on my desk, only to realize as I was getting ready for school Monday morning that Berryman's papers were missing. I knew immediately what had happened: My neatnik mother

didn't know what they were, so she threw them out. I made a beeline for the incinerator, and there they were, intact.

I made up some kind of cockamammy but laudatory appraisal of his poems, and Berryman seemed pleased. It was then that I found out I had almost lost a first draft of 77 *Dream Songs*, which would earn him a Pulitzer Prize.

Just thought your readers would like to know. Rest in peace, John Berryman.

WILLARD B. SHAPIRA
ROSEVILLE, MINN.

Signifying Nothing

With the important caveat that negative or mixed literary reviews can often be more entertaining and instructive than wholly positive ones, it seems William Deresiewicz's assessment of Tom McCarthy's novelistic output could be boiled down to two words: bad Pynchon ["Diminishing Returns," June 1]. One suspects the real reason Thomas Pynchon has never been awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature is not that he hasn't proved hugely influential on subsequent generations of writers, but rather that he has—and with largely unfortunate results.

Unlike the still-growing crop of (almost exclusively male) postmodern creators of boring, inelegant, ponderous, theory-driven doorstep novels, Pynchon's first books, *V.* and *The Crying of Lot 49*, carry their poststructuralism lightly and crackle with wit, satire, and well-crafted riffs on cultural-historical moments past. Since then, a whole subindustry of academic creative writing grinds ever forward, devoted to failed attempts at rewriting Pynchon's 1973 masterpiece, *Gravity's Rainbow*.

CHRIS NORDEN
LEWISTON, IDAHO

Books & the Arts.



DOUG CHAYKA

A New Eugenics

by NATHANIEL COMFORT

On April 18, scientists at Sun Yat-sen University in Guangdong, China, published an article in the obscure open-access journal *Protein & Cell* documenting their attempt at using an experimental new method of gene therapy on human embryos. Although the scientific significance of the results remains open to question, culturally the article is a landmark, for it has reanimated the age-old debate over human genetic improvement.

The Chinese scientists attempted to correct a mutation in the beta-globin gene, which encodes a crucial blood protein. Mutations in this gene lead to a variety of serious blood diseases. But the experiments failed. Although theoretically the new method, known as CRISPR (short for “clustered regularly spaced short palindromic repeats”) is extremely precise, in practice it often pro-

duces “off-target” mutations. In plain English, it makes a lot of changes in unintended locations, like what often happens when you hit “search/replace all” in a word-processing document. The principal conclusion from the paper is that the technique is still a long way from being reliable enough for the clinic. Nevertheless, the science media and pundits pounced on the story, and for a while “#CRISPR” was trending on Twitter.

CRISPR is the fastest, easiest, and most promising of several new methods known collectively as “gene editing.” Using them, scientists can edit the individual letters of the DNA code, almost as easily as a copy editor would delete, a stray comma or correct a spelling error. Advocates wax enthusiastic about its promise for correcting mutations for serious genetic diseases like cystic fibrosis and sickle-cell anemia. Other applications might include editing HIV out of someone’s genome or lowering genetic risks of heart disease or cancer. Indeed, every week brings new applications: CRISPR is turning out to be an extraordinarily versatile technique, applicable to many fields of

biomedical research. I’m pretty immune to biomedical hype, but gene editing has the marks of a genuine watershed moment in biotechnology. Once the kinks are worked out, CRISPR seems likely to change the way biologists do experiments, much as the circular saw changed how carpenters built houses.

The timing of the paper was provocative. It was submitted on March 30 and accepted on April 1; formal peer review was cursory at best. Two weeks before, scientists in the United States and Europe had called for a moratorium on experiments using CRISPR on human “germ-line” tissue (eggs, sperm, and embryos), which pass alterations on to one’s descendants, in contrast to the “somatic” cells that compose the rest of the body. The embryos in the Chinese experiments were not implanted and in fact could not have become humans: They were the unviable, discarded products of in vitro fertilization. Still, the paper was a sensational flouting of the Westerners’ call for restraint. It was hard not to read its publication as an East Asian Bronx cheer.

The circumstances of the paper’s publication underline the fact that the core of the

Nathaniel Comfort (@nccomfort), a professor at the Institute of the History of Medicine at Johns Hopkins University, is the author of The Science of Human Perfection: How Genes Became the Heart of American Medicine.

CRISPR debate is not about the technological challenge but the ethical one: that gene editing could enable a new eugenics, a eugenics of personal choice, in which humans guide their own evolution individually and in families. Commentators are lining up as conservatives and liberals on the issue. Conservatives, such as Jennifer Doudna (one of CRISPR's inventors) and the Nobel laureates David Baltimore and Paul Berg, have called for cautious deliberation. They were among those who proposed the moratorium on using CRISPR on human embryos. "You could exert control over human heredity with this technique," said Baltimore. George Q. Daley, of Boston Children's Hospital, said that CRISPR raises the fundamental issue of whether we are willing to "take control of our genetic destiny." Are we ready to edit our children's genomes to perfection, as in the movie *Gattaca*? Could the government someday pass laws banning certain genetic constitutions or requiring others?

The CRISPR liberals are optimists. They insist that we should proceed as rapidly as possible, once safety can be assured—for example, that an "edit" wouldn't inadvertently cause cancer while treating thalassemia. Some, such as the Oxford philosopher Julian Savulescu, insist that we have a "moral imperative" to proceed with engineering our genomes as fast as our sequencers can carry us. Savulescu believes it would be unethical to have the technology to produce better children and not use it. (For once, I'm with the conservatives.)

This debate is very familiar to a historian. Thus far, CRISPR is following the classic arc of breakthrough methods in genetics and biotech. First come millennialist debates over the new eugenics; then, calls for caution. A few cowboys may attempt rash experiments, which often fail, sometimes tragically. Finally, the technology settles into a more humdrum life as another useful tool in the biologist's kit.

Each instance of this pattern, however, occurs in a different context, both scientifically and culturally. And while scientists, philosophers, and other commentators have been discussing the scientific risks and merits of CRISPR ad nauseam, no one seems to be placing the debate itself in this broader historical setting. Over the last 150 years of efforts to control human evolution, the focus on the object of control has tightened, from the population, to the individual, to the gene—and now, with CRISPR, to the single letters of our DNA code. Culturally, during this period, the pendulum has swung from cooperative collectivism to neoliberalism. The larger question, then, is: With the emergence of gene editing during an era of self-interested

free-market individualism, will eugenics become acceptable and widespread again?

Until relatively recently, the only way to create genetically better humans was to breed them. In 1865, Charles Darwin's half-cousin Francis Galton sought both to inspire society's richest, wisest, and healthiest to breed like rabbits and to persuade the sick, stupid, and poor to take one for the empire and remain childless. In 1883, he named the plan "eugenics," from the Greek *eugenes*, meaning "well-born" or "well-bred." In Galton's mind, eugenics was a much kinder approach to population management than ruthless Malthusian efforts to eliminate charity and public services. However misguided eugenics may seem today, Galton saw it as a humane alternative to simply letting the disadvantaged freeze, starve, and die.

In early-20th-century America, Galton's plan suddenly seemed far too passive and slow. A new generation of eugenicists, spurred by novel experimental methods in genetics and other sciences, sought to take a firmer hand in controlling the reproduction of the lower classes, people of color, and the insane or infirm. Can-do Americans passed laws restricting marriage and immigration to prevent the degradation of an imagined American "stock." Some, such as the psychologist Henry Goddard and the biologist Charles Davenport, sought to round up the so-called feeble-minded (those with a mental age below 12) and institutionalize them as a sort of reproductive quarantine—adult swim in the gene pool. But others pushed for laws to simply sterilize those seen as unfit. That way, they could then marry or have sex with whomever they wanted without endangering the national germ plasm. Altering the body seemed more humane than confining it.

Involuntary sterilization soon lost any veneer of benevolence. In the United States, thousands of people were sterilized against their will, under eugenic laws passed in more than 30 states. For the most part, educated middle- and upper-class white Protestant men decided who was fit to reproduce, and naturally they judged fitness in their own image. In Germany, a decades-old program of *Rassenhygiene* or "race hygiene" took a cue from the vigorous American eugenics movement. The fingerprints of Davenport and other American eugenicists are on the infamous 1933 Nazi sterilization law. Controlling bodies was not so humane after all.

Around midcentury, many American scholars and scientists turned to environmental and cultural solutions for social

problems, including poverty, mental illness, and poor education. However, some thinkers—biologists and others—advocated for more and better biotechnology. How much cleaner and more rational it would be, they argued, to separate sex from reproduction and make babies in the laboratory, using only the highest-quality sperm and eggs. In his 1935 book *Out of the Night*, the geneticist Hermann Joseph Muller called this "euteleogenesis." He and others painted sunny pictures of free love and sperm banks. But three years earlier, in *Brave New World*, the English novelist Aldous Huxley had taken a much darker view of the scientific control of evolution. "Bokanovsky's Process"—test-tube human cloning—was a "major tool of social stability!" said his director of hatcheries and conditioning. It was the biotechnical core of "Community, identity, stability," the motto of the One World State.

Since then, each step in the development of biotechnology has seemed to bring Bokanovsky's Process closer to realization. In 1969, the Harvard biologist Jonathan Beckwith and colleagues discovered how to isolate, or "clone," a gene. At about the same time, Dan Nathans and Hamilton Smith at Johns Hopkins discovered how to use a type of molecular scissors called restriction enzymes to snip, insert, and reattach DNA strands in the lab. Each enzyme cuts the DNA at a specific site. (CRISPR, too, is based on naturally occurring bacterial enzymes.) In the 1970s, researchers discovered more than 100 different restriction enzymes, forming a battery of tools to cut DNA almost anywhere one wished. The new research enabled genes to be recombined—cut and pasted at will, even between species. To techno-optimists, genetic engineering would make the old, inhumane eugenics unnecessary. There would be no need to prevent people with bad genes from reproducing if one could simply repair those genes.

Public outcry. Eugenic angst. Predictions of enzymatic Armageddon. The city of Cambridge, Massachusetts—home to Harvard and MIT—banned recombinant DNA research outright. (Some of the schools' top scientists promptly decamped for New York, Maryland, and California.) In 1974, fearing a massive clampdown from on high, scientists self-imposed a moratorium on recombinant DNA research. Ten months later, at a meeting at the Asilomar Conference Center near Monterey, California, David Baltimore, Paul Berg, James Watson, and other scientific luminaries agreed on a set of guidelines for laboratory safety: how to prevent, for example, a lethal bacterium from escaping the lab and causing epidemics or massive agricultural



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The longtime Cuba correspondent for *The Nation*, Peter Kornbluh is the Cuba analyst at the National Security Archive in Washington, DC, and the editor of *Bay of Pigs Declassified*, co-editor of *The Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962*, and co-author of *Back Channel to Cuba: The Hidden History of Negotiations Between Washington and Havana*, published in fall 2014.

Charles Bittner

The Nation's Academic Liaison, Charles Bittner has taught journalism and sociology at Southern Methodist University and has for many years hosted *The Nation's* annual seminar cruise.

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or ecological disaster. Within five years, fears had subsided and recombinant DNA had become a standard laboratory technique—forming the basis of a burgeoning biotech industry, whose early triumphs included synthetic insulin, the cancer drug interferon, and exogenous erythropoietin, a hormone that regulates the production of red blood cells.

But Asilomar is not the only—or even the best—historical comparison for CRISPR. Since the early 1960s, visionary scientists had imagined an era of “genetic surgery,” in which defective genes could simply be repaired or replaced. Rather than curing diseased patients, or segregating them from the “healthy” population, researchers said they would cure diseased molecules. In 1980, the UCLA researcher Martin Cline made the first primitive attempt at using engineered molecules therapeutically. Like the CRISPR researchers, he targeted the beta-globin gene. Cline, however, ignored more than just his colleagues’ own recommendations: Flouting National Institutes of Health regulations, he went overseas and injected a live virus containing the beta-globin gene into the bone marrow of two young women. Fortunately, the dosage was too small to have any effect; the girls were not helped, but neither were they harmed. Cline, on the other hand, suffered: He was publicly censured and had his federal funding restricted.

By the late ’80s, gene therapy seemed poised for a breakthrough. Led by NIH researcher W. French Anderson, starry-eyed biologists anticipated cutting and pasting their way to the end of genetic disease. Hundreds of grant applications were filed for gene-therapy research. In 1990, Anderson and colleagues conducted the first approved trial, on an exceedingly rare disease called adenosine deaminase deficiency, in which the loss of a single enzyme wipes out the entire immune system. The trial appeared to be a success. But the gene-therapy cowboys were humbled in 1999, when Jesse Gelsinger, a teenager suffering from a rare liver disorder, died of massive organ failure from the engineered virus used to ferry a gene into his cells. Then, in 2002, a French gene-therapy trial to correct immune-system failure was a success—at least until the subjects of the experiment developed leukemia, because the virus used as a delivery vehicle disrupted a gene required for normal cell growth. The FDA then suspended retroviral gene-therapy trials on bone-marrow cells until regulatory measures could be implemented. Unintended consequences killed the gene-therapy hype.

In the succeeding years, gene therapy has quietly returned. Old methods have been im-

proved, new methods have been developed, and researchers have had limited success with treatments for a variety of cancers, AIDS, and several eye diseases. Hope remains high among the optimists, but even they acknowledge that the promise remains greater than the results.

The gene-therapy craze of the 1990s yielded two fundamental ethical distinctions. First, researchers distinguished engineering the germ line from engineering somatic cells. Germ-line modifications are not used to treat disease in an individual, but to prevent it (or lower the risk) in future individuals. Unlike preventive public-health measures such as the quarantine, however, meddling with the genome has a high risk of unintended consequences. The genome is like an ecosystem, with every element ultimately connected to every other. Inadvertently damaging alterations could thus be seen as harming the genomes of the others without their consent. Yet Anderson was willing to consider germ-line modifications should somatic gene therapy eventually prove safe. (Scientists like Harvard’s George Church make similar arguments about CRISPR today.) The second distinction was that gene therapy should only be used to treat disease—not to enhance or alter normal traits. In short, gene therapists considered therapeutic applications ethical but enhancement not—and creating a master race was right out. (Anderson was more principled about some things than others; he is currently serving time for child molestation.)

Parallel to the development of genetic engineering, advances in reproductive technology made Muller’s and Huxley’s vision of test-tube babies a reality. On July 25, 1978, Louise Brown was born through in vitro fertilization, a technique developed by Patrick Steptoe and Robert Edwards. Combining IVF with new genetic-screening technologies made it technically possible to reject embryos with undesirable traits—or select those with desirable ones. “You do not need the still distant prospect of human cloning to begin to get worried,” wrote Anthony Tucker in *The Guardian*. James Watson, who had recently recanted his conservative position on recombinant DNA research, nevertheless predicted: “All hell will break loose.”

An even braver new world dawned in 1996, when the Roslin Institute in Scotland announced the birth of Dolly the sheep—the first “cloned” large mammal. The technique, formally known as somatic-cell nuclear transfer, revived the debate over designer babies. The US National Bioethics Advisory Commission launched an investigation and, in 1997, published a report that led to the unusual step of restricting a procedure that did not exist. The NIH

prophylactically prohibited cloning human beings with federal funds.

Researchers promptly announced plans to attempt it with private money. One was Brigitte Boisselier, who was supported by Clonaid, the research arm of the transhumanist group the Raëlians. Its leader, Raël (né Claude Vorilhon), claimed to have been contacted by extraterrestrials. On December 27, 2002, Boisselier announced that a cloned baby, called Eve, had been born, although Clonaid wouldn’t reveal any data or produce Eve for inspection. The mainstream scientific community rolled its collective eyes. Once again, though, the dust eventually settled, and somatic-cell nuclear transfer remains a legitimate laboratory technique. Clonaid claims to be cloning away still. But no armies of Hitlers have stormed across Europe, and to date, no genetically optimized Superman has communed with the groovy dudes from the next galaxy.

One important result from the cloning debate was that the kibosh on genetic enhancement began to relax. In 2001, Julian Savulescu started to argue for “procreative beneficence,” a principle that holds that people are morally obligated to have the best children possible—including through genetic-enhancement technologies. (Savulescu’s *Enhancing Human Capacities*, published in 2011, continues the campaign.) The eugenically named, self-proclaimed visionary Gregory Stock published *Redesigning Humans* in 2002; it rosily envisioned writing “a new page in the history of life, allowing us to seize control of our evolutionary future.” What could go wrong?

CRISPR, then, is the latest chapter in a long, darkly comic history of human genetic improvement. Like whole-gene engineering in the 1970s, gene editing is proving remarkably versatile in basic science research: New applications appear weekly. But conservative researchers such as Doudna, Baltimore, and Berg insist that the taboos against germ-line engineering and enhancement remain in place. However, notwithstanding Baltimore’s and Berg’s reassurance that eugenics is “generally considered abhorrent,” some commentators are actively and publicly advocating what they consider a new kind of eugenics. Their argument is couched in technology, but it rests on politics.

The eugenics movement of the early 20th century was rooted in a spirit of collectivism. Ideals of progress and perfection dominated American culture. Across the political spectrum, Americans sought social improvement through a variety of reforms, ranging from

public health to food production to workplace environments and education. Such a project required collective effort. Government legislation was broadly accepted as a tool of positive change. Cooperation for the good of society was a sign of good citizenship. And science, epitomizing rationality, efficiency, and mastery over nature, was society's most potent tool of progress.

Eugenics, often referred to as "racial hygiene," was associated with the Progressive hygiene movement in public health. In 1912, Harvey Ernest Jordan, who later became dean of the University of Virginia's medical school, addressed a conference of eugenicists on the importance of their field for medicine. He asserted, with the buoyancy of the era, that the country was emerging from a benighted period of selfish individualism—which Mark Twain had dubbed the "Gilded Age"—into an enlightened phase of concern for one's fellow man. Eugenics was of vital interest to medicine, he wrote, because it sought to prevent disease and disability before it occurred:

Modern medicine, yielding to the demands of real progress, is becoming less a curative and more a preventive science.... This represents the medical aspect of the general change from individualism to collectivism.

Progressives had faith in government as an instrument of social—and biological—change. By the 1960s, that faith had eroded. The Cold War had sparked an anti-authoritarian New Left that criticized state control as a corruption of the collectivist spirit. Left-wing biologists sometimes found themselves in an awkward position. When Beckwith, a staunch leftist, cloned the first gene, he held a press conference warning against the dangers of his own research. "The work we have done may have bad consequences over which we have no control," he said. His graduate student James Shapiro commented, "The use by the Government is the thing that frightens us."

During the 1970s, New Deal liberalism began to give way to neoliberalism. At the turn of the 21st century, biotech and info tech had grown as dominant as Big Oil and Big Steel had been in 1900. The Internet has become our railroad system. The last 30 years have seen Jordan's "general change from individualism to collectivism" reversed: Elites justify increasing inequality with a libertarian rhetoric of individual freedom.

Individualism, say the biotech cheerleaders, immunizes us against the abuse of reproductive genetics. In their free-market utopia, control over who gets to be born would be a matter of personal choice, not state order.



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Couples should have the freedom to undergo in vitro fertilization and to select the healthiest embryos—even the best ones, because "best" is no longer a matter of official mandate. For those who define eugenics as state control over reproduction, this is not eugenics.

Others adopt a definition closer to that of the 1921 International Eugenics Congress: Eugenics is "the self-direction of human evolution." Many critics over the years have argued that eugenics wasn't wrong; rather, it was done badly and for the wrong reasons. So it goes today. In 2004, Nicholas Agar published *Liberal Eugenics*, a philosophical defense of genetic enhancement. In a nutshell, he argues that genetic enhancements ought not to be treated differently from environmental enhancements: If we are allowed to provide good schools, we must be allowed to provide good genes. Like Savulescu, Agar insists that it is immoral to prohibit parents from producing the best children they can, by whatever means. In 2008, in the foreword to a reissue of Charles Davenport's 1912 *Heredity and Eugenics*, Matt Ridley, a viscount, zoologist, science writer, and Conservative member of the House of Lords, argued that the problem with eugenics was its underlying collectivist ideology. Selfishness would save the human race. "There is every difference between individual

eugenics and Davenport's goal," he wrote. "One aims for individual happiness with no thought to the future of the human race; the other aims to improve the race at the expense of individual happiness." Similarly, Gregory Stock wrote that a "free-market environment with real individual choice" was the best way to protect us from eugenic abuse. Liberal eugenics is really neoliberal eugenics.

In which case, it's hard to see how individual choice and the invisible hand will defang the dangers that eugenics still poses. In a 2011 *Hastings Center Report*, the Australian bioethicist Robert Sparrow showed how libertarian, individualist eugenics would lead to the same ends as good old-fashioned Progressive eugenics. Savulescu's "best possible children" must naturally have the most opportunities to flourish and the fewest impediments to a happy, fulfilling life. Accordingly, parents should select the traits that society privileges. But in our current society, who has the most opportunities? Of course: a tall, white, straight, handsome man. If neoliberal genetic enhancement were to proceed unregulated, then social convention, cultural ideals, and market forces would drive us toward producing the same tired old Aryan master race.

Further, the free market commodifies all. Neoliberal eugenics creates a disturbing ten-

dency to regard ourselves, one another, and especially our children as specimens to be improved. The view that “the genome is not perfect,” as John Harris, another pro-enhancement philosopher, puts it, perpetuates the notion of genetic hygiene. Even cautious reports, like one that appeared recently in the *International Business Times*, propagate this idea: “any hope that [CRISPR] will help physicians ensure spotless genomes,” they write, remains distant. Not to put too fine a point on it, but whatever the time line, the goal of a spotless genome implies genetic cleansing.

Scholars of disability have mounted a vigorous critique of the pursuit of genetic perfection. Call it the *Gattaca* defense: By granting individuals the power and permission to select against difference, we will be selecting for intolerance of difference. But Sparrow notes that enforcing diversity is itself morally problematic. Should gene editing become a safe and viable option, it would be unethical to prohibit parents from using it to correct a lethal genetic disease such as Tay-Sachs, or one that causes great suffering, such as cystic fibrosis or myotonic dystrophy.

Where, then, does one draw the line—and how easy would it be to enforce? Harris, Savulescu, Agar, and others say that once you let in any modifications, you have to allow them all.

What gets all too easily lost in this debate is that it takes place in a genocentric universe. Even those opposed to genetic enhancement presume DNA to be the ultimate determiner of all that is human, and biotechnology the most effective tool for solving social problems. Such genetic determinism is inherently politically conservative—whatever one’s personal politics.

Here’s why: Sci-fi genetic fantasies, whether hand-waving or hand-wringing, divert our attention from other, more important determinants of health. Studies by the World Health Organization, the federal Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and academic researchers leave no doubt that the biggest factors in determining health and quality of life are overwhelmingly social. Genetics plays a role in disease, to be sure, but decent, affordable housing; access to real food, education, and transportation; and reducing exposure to crime and violence are far more important. In short, if we really wanted to engineer better, happier, healthier humans, we would focus much more on nurture than on nature.

The reason we don’t is obvious: the very selfishness that neoliberals proclaim

as the panacea for eugenic abuse. Genetic engineering primarily benefits industry and the upper classes. In vitro fertilization and genetic diagnosis are expensive; genetic therapy would be even more so. Genetic medicine is touted as the key to ending “one-size-fits-all” medicine, instead tailoring care to the idiosyncrasies of each individual. President Obama’s Precision Medicine Initiative, announced in his last State of the Union address, extolled a vision of individualized care for all. But historians of medicine have shown that the rhetoric of individualized medicine has been with us at least since the days of Hippocrates. The reality is that for 25 centuries, individualized treatment has been accessible to the rich and powerful, while lower-status people in every era—be they foreigners, slaves, women, or the poor—have received one-size-fits-all care, or no care at all.

The idealists and visionaries insist that costs will drop and that technologies now accessible only to the rich will become more widely available. And that does happen—but new technologies continually stream in at the top, leading to a stable hierarchy of care that follows socioeconomic lines. Absent universal healthcare, ultra-high-tech biomedicine depends on a trickle-down ideology that would have made Ronald Reagan proud.

Further, molecular problems have molecular solutions. The eternal eugenic targets—disease, IQ, social deviance—are overdetermined; one can explain them equally as social or as biomedical problems. When they’re defined as social problems, their solutions require reforming society. But when we cast them in molecular terms, the answers tend to be pharmaceutical or genetic. The source of the problem becomes the individual; the biomedical-industrial complex, along with social inequities, escape blame.

In short, neoliberal eugenics is the same old eugenics we’ve always known. When it comes to controlling our evolution, individualism and choice point toward the same outcomes as authoritarian collectivism: a genetically stratified society resistant to social change—one that places the blame for society’s ills on individuals rather than corporations or the government.

I’ll be excited to watch the workaday applications of techniques like CRISPR unfold, in medicine and, especially, basic science. But sexy debates over whether reproductive biotechnology will permit us to control our genetic evolution merely divert us from the cultural evolution that we must undertake in order to see meaningful improvement in human lives. ■

The Right Small Words

by ROBERT S. BOYNTON

In the winter of 1988, I arrived in New York with more enthusiasm than good sense—and no journalism experience—hoping to become a writer. Although only an intern at *The Nation*, I was casting around for people I might eventually profile. One such character was a brilliant autodidact, who happened to live in the apartment one floor below mine.

“That sounds like Joe Mitchell’s pieces about Joe Gould,” a friend of mine commented when I mentioned the idea. The blank look on my face betrayed the fact that I hadn’t heard of either. “You want to be a *writer* and you don’t even know who *Joseph Mitchell* is?” he said, voice dripping with scorn.

Humiliated, I did some research and dis-

Robert S. Boynton’s The Invitation-Only Zone: The True Story of North Korea’s Abduction Project will be published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux in January.

Man in Profile

Joseph Mitchell of *The New Yorker*.

By Thomas Kunkel.

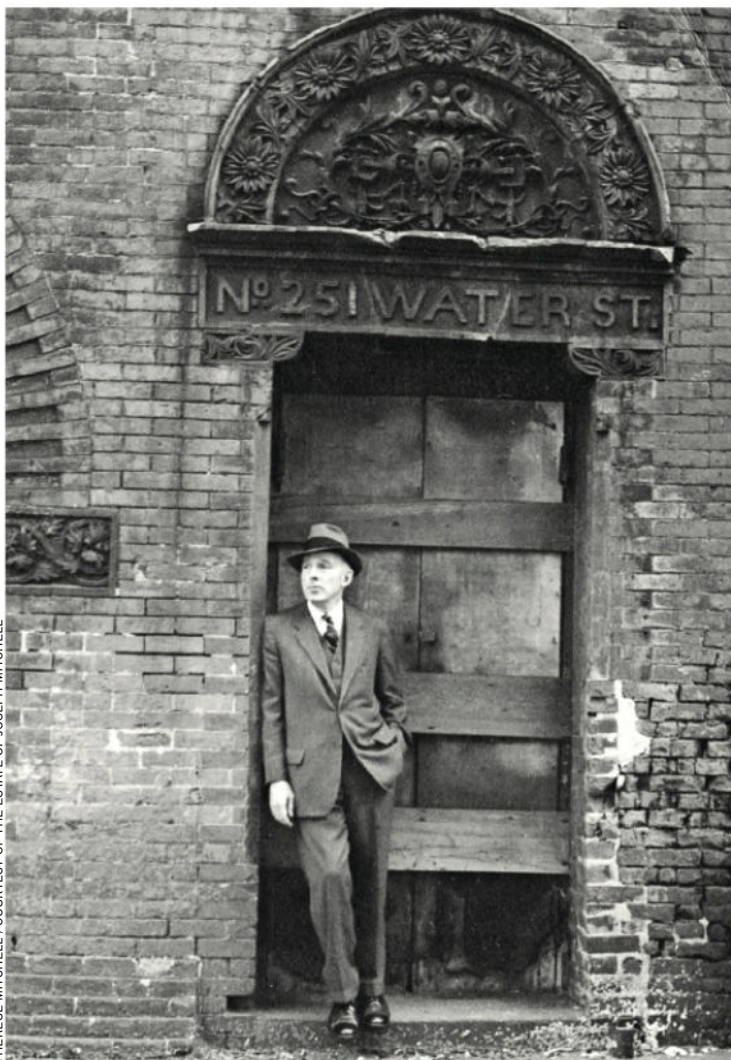
Random House. 384 pp. \$30.

covered that Mitchell’s last published article, “Joe Gould’s Secret”—about the Village eccentric also known as Professor Seagull, who claimed to be the author of the longest book ever written, the (entirely imaginary) *Oral History of Our Time*—had appeared in *The New Yorker* in 1964, a year after I was born. There were no paperback editions of Mitchell’s four collections, and the hardcovers were long out of print, fetching steep prices in secondhand bookstores, if you could find them at all. I also discovered an old photograph of Mitchell, and learned that he lived with his wife and daughters in a modest apartment building on West 10th Street. It wasn’t long before I spotted him strolling down lower Fifth Avenue, wearing his signa-

ture three-piece Brooks Brothers suit, freshly polished shoes, and a fedora. I still hadn't read anything by him, but at least I knew who he was.

According to Thomas Kunkel's biography, *Man in Profile*, I wasn't alone. By the late '80s, Mitchell "had come to grasp the dreadful irony: If he was known by a modern audience at all, it was for *not* writing." A Mitchell renaissance began in 1992, when Pantheon Books published *Up in the Old Hotel*, his collected *New Yorker* nonfiction, which spent several weeks on the bestseller list and still sells steadily in paperback. A new generation of readers discovered Mitchell (*Born Again* was the title he suggested for the collection), and interest in his work continued to grow after he died from lung cancer in 1996, at the age of 87, the year *Joe Gould's Secret* was reissued as a stand-alone volume. A charming movie version of it, starring Stanley Tucci as Mitchell and Hope Davis as his wife Therese, appeared in 2000.

Why all the fuss about a *New Yorker* writer who published virtually nothing during his final 32 years? Mitchell had received an unusual degree of attention since 1943, when the literary critic Malcolm Cowley deemed him "the best reporter in the country," at least at "depicting curious characters," in *The New Republic*. Comparing his characters to those of Dickens, Cowley explained Mitchell's basic method: He "likes to start with an unimportant hero, but he collects all the facts about him, arranges them to give the desired effects, and usually ends by describing the customs of a whole community." In 1965, the critic Stanley Edgar Hyman wondered whether the claims made on Mitchell's behalf by Cowley and others were too modest. He argued that Mitchell was no ordinary magazine writer, "a reporter only in the sense that Defoe is a reporter, a humorist only in the sense that Faulkner is a humorist." According to Hyman, Mitchell was involved in a more ambitious philosophical project: exploring existential imponderables like "human dignity," "fertility and resurrection," and "the depths of the unconscious."



THERESE MITCHELL / COURTESY OF THE ESTATE OF JOSEPH MITCHELL

Joseph Mitchell.

Mitchell did so in a plainspoken, deliberately unfussy prose style. Kunkel accurately describes it as "the kind of prose that non-writers might have assumed was easy but that professionals knew was anything but." Mitchell's long, carefully constructed, fact-laden sentences often culminated in lists, which he used for both their musical effect and the authority they conveyed, whether he was describing New York Harbor's sea life ("clams on the sludgy bottom, and mussels and mud shrimp and conchs and crabs and sea worms and sea plants") or the grave-stone carvings in a Staten Island cemetery ("death's-heads, angels, hourglasses, hands pointing upward, recumbent lambs, anchors, lilies, weeping willows, and roses on broken stems"). "Setting these objects side by side in a row has an effect that is both as plain as Shaker furniture and as expansive as a cinematic tracking shot," writes Luc Sante, one of the many contemporary writers influenced by Mitchell's prose and outlook. Kunkel notes that "Mitchell stories may not have

much plot, as such; the 'action' more typically involves human beings revealing themselves to us, bit by bit, usually in their own words, until we become privy to their innermost feelings and impulses." Mitchell lays down sentences the way a master brick-layer builds a wall: deliberately, one increment at a time, allowing each row sufficient time to set. "I do believe that the most commonplace words are the ones that in the end have the most power," he writes in an unpublished journal. "I'll search endlessly for the right small words of a few syllables that hold something up. A foundation."

The *New Yorker* was America's first urbane magazine. It was founded by Harold Ross (the subject of Kunkel's previous book), the son of a Colorado silver miner and a schoolteacher. Ross was a high-school dropout who became a reporter in New York, where he had an idea for a magazine directed at novice metropolitans like himself. It would be a "reflection in word and picture of metropolitan life," according to the 1924 prospectus. His

insight was less demographic than aspirational. "You cannot keep *The New Yorker* out of the hands of New York-minded people, wherever they are," announced a promotion for the magazine. "New York is not a tack on a map, not a city, not an island nor an evening at '21.' *The New Yorker* is a mood, a point of view." And like *The New Yorker's* readers, most of its writers and editors came from elsewhere. "That very 'otherness' was key to *The New Yorker's* freshness and inventiveness, in that all those creative people were exploring their curiosity about New York within the magazine itself," Kunkel writes.

Few were more curious about New York City than Joseph Quincy Mitchell, born in Fairmont, North Carolina, in 1908, to a family with roots going back to the Revolutionary War veteran Nazareth Mitchell. Generations of Mitchells farmed cotton, tobacco, timber, soybeans, and corn, and, while not wealthy, they were more comfortable than most in Robeson County, one of the poorest in the South. Joseph was the oldest son, and it was as-

sumed he would eventually take over the family business, regardless of his inability to master the mathematics necessary to navigate the agricultural-commodity markets. He attended the University of North Carolina, where he became a devoted student of Stephen Crane, Dostoyevsky, Turgenev, and Joyce, whose novel *Ulysses*, then banned, Mitchell was able to read because a friend smuggled a copy into the country for him. Mitchell became a Joyce devotee, a lifelong member of the James Joyce Society, who named his daughter, Nora, after the novelist's wife. *Ulysses* was not the sole object of Mitchell's interest in Joyce. "The novel that I get down most often is *Finnegans Wake*," he wrote in his journal. "I read it over and over, just as one of my grandmothers used to read the Bible. I am now reading it for the seventh time."

While at college, Mitchell composed fictional versions of the "field sketches" for which he would later become famous. When an article he wrote about tobacco farming was published in the *New York Herald Tribune*, he decided to go to New York and try his hand at journalism. He received no encouragement from his father, who asked him, "Son, is that the best you can do, sticking your nose into other people's business?" Mitchell would spend the rest of his life shuttling between New York and Fairmont, a self-described "exile," consumed by guilt for leaving home and disappointing his father.

Mitchell arrived in New York in time for the 1929 crash, an experience that added to his psychological baggage. "Looking back on it, I think I got scared during the Depression and never got unscared," he wrote in an unpublished memoir. New York had more than a dozen daily newspapers at the time, and Mitchell got a copyboy job at *The World*, soon working his way up to a reporter's position at the *Herald Tribune* and, finally, the *World-Telegram*, writing dozens of celebrity profiles of people like Eleanor Roosevelt, Kitty Carlisle, Jimmy Durante, and Tallulah Bankhead. It wasn't long before Mitchell had become a marquee name, his stories regularly published on the front page, his picture featured on *World-Telegram* delivery trucks.

Mitchell's literary journalism grew out of the work by late-19th-century muckrakers and novelists like Crane, Jacob Riis, and Lincoln Steffens. Crane, for one, thought nothing of chronicling the same incident in different genres, as he did when he wrote about being shipwrecked in a newspaper article, a short story, and a magazine piece. Crane used his novelist's sensibility to render New York as a "mosaic of little worlds." The historian Alan Trachtenberg wrote that while

crusading journalists sought to convert "the reader to social sympathy," Crane strove to turn "the sheer data into experience." Taking his cue from Crane, Mitchell became a gifted listener who rendered the people in his stories with novelistic detail. "Mitchell coaxed his subjects with a great and animated enthusiasm, as if the secret to happiness or the meaning of life could be found in their sometimes-dreary monologues," Kunkel writes.

Mitchell thrived at the *World-Telegram*, but his work wasn't dramatically different from his colleagues'. That changed in November 1937, when he was assigned a six-part series on Franz Boas, the German-born Columbia professor of anthropology. The encounter was a "graduate-level seminar in anthropology that caused him to rethink, as a reporter, why people are who they are and do what they do," notes Kunkel. As the interview proceeded, Mitchell realized that Boas was studying him, "a newspaper reporter," much as an anthropologist might observe a member of a newly discovered tribe.

Boas was the father of what has come to be known as "cultural relativism": the belief that societies can't be ranked objectively, as was the pseudoscientific fashion of the time. He argued that differences between societies were explained by culture, not biology, and that as groups migrated, their traits merged and overlapped with those whom they encountered, resulting in what is today referred to as "hybridity." Boas approached the societies he studied as subjects in their own right, possessing creativity and will. The anthropologist concluded the interview by giving Mitchell a copy of his book *Anthropology and Modern Life*. "Don't take anything for granted, don't take yourself for granted, or your father," he advised the reporter. Mitchell left the encounter "feeling born again."

Harold Ross hired Mitchell in 1938, assuming he'd get stories similar to those that had been appearing in the *World-Telegram*. In a sense, he was right, in that several of the people Mitchell had written about for the newspaper appeared in his early *New Yorker* stories as well. However, the encounter with Boas had altered his view of the world. "I began to see that I had written a lot of things that were highly dubious," he recalled.

Here is his 1938 *World-Telegram* description of Mazie Gordon, the owner-operator of a seedy Bowery movie theater that provided a respite for men down on their luck:

She is known as "Miss Mazie" by the blighted men who exist in the walk-up hotels along the Bowery. Her real name is Mazie Gordon, and she is

a blonde with a heart of gold. Her clothing is flamboyant, and she uses cosmetics with abandon.

Here is Mazie, two years later, in *The New Yorker*:

Sitting majestically in her cage like a raffish queen, Mazie is one of the few pleasant sights of the Bowery. She is a short, bosomy woman in her middle forties. Some people believe she has a blurry resemblance to Mae West. Her hair is the color of sulphur. Her face is dead white, and she wears a smudge of rouge the size of a silver dollar on each cheek.... "I got a public of my own, just like a god-damn movie-pitcher star."

In the hands of Mitchell the anthropologist, Mazie becomes a willful, multidimensional character, not a stereotyped "blonde with a heart of gold." Combining the tenacity of a fine reporter with the ethnographic insight of a social scientist, Mitchell discovered a perspective that wasn't condescending or ingratiating, portraying his characters as neither victims nor heroes. "If the truth was known," concludes Jane Barnell, the bearded lady whom Mitchell profiled in 1940, "we're all freaks together."

This is the Mitchell who inspired generations of writers by showing us how to observe something or someone without preconceptions, as if for the first time. In his hands, the intrepid urban reporter, simply by describing the scene with an air of sincere wonder, provides an oasis of ingenuousness in an all-too-knowing culture.

Getting hired by *The New Yorker* was both the best and the worst thing that happened to Mitchell. In order to provide its writers with something akin to a steady salary, the magazine had an unorthodox compensation plan according to which writers would draw money against future earnings, a system that left many of them working as indentured servants for years. The idea of being in debt so terrified Mitchell that he became the sole staff writer with a conventional salary, starting at \$100 per week. At first, Mitchell maintained his *World-Telegram* level of productivity, publishing 13 pieces in 1939, half of which were fiction. Three of the pieces that made his reputation—"Lady Olga," "Mazie," and "The Old House at Home"—appeared in 1940.

He began to slow down in the 1950s, publishing only five stories. With his newfound sense of vocation, Mitchell spent more time reporting each of his stories. He began to suf-

fer from depression, and with his small but regular *New Yorker* salary and revenue from the farm, there was little external pressure on him to produce. Everyone acknowledged that his work was getting even better, and some of his most probing, profound pieces appeared between 1950 and 1964, introducing the world to such memorable characters as Louis Morino, the owner of Mitchell's favorite seafood restaurant, Sloppy Louie's; Old Mr. Flood, the 95-year-old retired house wrecker who lived on a diet of fresh seafood, harbor air, and the occasional Scotch; George Henry Hunter, the chairman of the board of trustees of the African Methodist Church in Sandy Ground, Staten Island.

As the New York that Mitchell knew in the '30s and '40s began to slip away, a note of belatedness crept into his work, which had always possessed a healthy sense of nostalgia for the world he had come to know as a young man. His published work remained austere, but his private world grew more overwrought. "I collapsed inside with shame and with pure, unadulterated gazing-down-into-the-open-grave-as-the-coffin-is-lowered bitter choked-up scalding grief," he writes when a mechanic informs him his car is beyond repair. The sections of Mitchell's unpublished memoir that have appeared recently in *The New Yorker* are similarly fraught ("almost everybody has come to seem strange to me, including myself"), displaying the writer's dark side with little of his humor. The self-doubt that dogged him has become crippling, and he fears that even his most famous painstakingly drawn characters are little more than "stereotypes."

Today, the two most commonly asked questions about Mitchell are whether he made things up and why he stopped publishing. In his 1948 collection, Mitchell himself admitted that one of his most famous characters, Mr. Flood, was a composite. Kunkel reviews each of his stories with the thoroughness of a forensic detective, discovers a few more composites, but is unable to explain why Mitchell used them. A number of his early *New Yorker* pieces had been published as "fiction" rather than "fact," so it was public knowledge that he was comfortable with both. That was clearly the case when he wrote about Mr. Flood, whom Mitchell explained was "not one man; combined in him are aspects of several old men who work or hang out in Fulton Fish Market, or who did in the past. I wanted these stories to be truthful rather than factual, but they are solidly based on facts."

The last sentence was probably unnecessary. No one doubted Mitchell's reporting

acumen, but when book publishers and admirers were unable to find some of his characters, it raised questions about the existence of the rest. Part of the magic of Mitchell's writings had always been the way that he inhabited his characters (he assigned Mr. Flood his own birthday, July 27; both ate little other than seafood), imbuing them with the wisdom, perspective, and knowledge that he possessed. But after he confessed to having created some of his characters, the long, seductive quotes attributed to others seemed suspicious. *The New Yorker* had published composite characters before, especially in its early days, when Ross thought of the magazine as more humorous than serious. Kunkel discovers that, according to Mitchell, it was Ross who suggested that he bring his beloved Fulton Fish Market characters to life in a composite—so, unlike more recent fabulists, such as Stephen Glass and Jayson Blair, the writer had the boss's permission. And Mitchell feared that readers would conclude that all his characters were composites, which is why he added the note to the Mr. Flood collection. Today, composites are forbidden in all respectable publications, and there are journalism professors who won't teach Mitchell. I think it makes more sense to think of Mitchell as an heir to Crane—a 19th-century man living in a 20th-century world.

As to why Mitchell stopped writing, Kunkel is less enlightening. Mitchell had been aware of Joe Gould since 1932, and in 1942 he pitched a profile of Gould as "a perfect example of a type of eccentric widespread in New York City, the solitary nocturnal wanderer," adding that "that was the aspect of him that interested me most, that and his oral history." When Gould learned that Mitchell wanted to profile him, he telephoned to greet him "at the beginning of a great endeavor."

Little did Mitchell know that Gould would contribute to his undoing. As Kunkel writes: "In Gould, Mitchell found a near-doppelgänger. Like Mitchell, Gould had left behind his home and a disappointed father. Like Mitchell, Gould was a practiced listener." It wasn't until 1957, when Gould died, that Mitchell felt he could reveal the truth about his nonexistent oral history. "Joe Gould's Secret," the sequel to the 1942 profile, ran several times longer than the original and has a darker, more confessional tone than Mitchell's previous work. In a long, melancholy passage, he describes the sprawling New York novel he had wanted to write when he was a young newspaper reporter. Mitchell's mother died while he was in the middle of writing the second Gould piece, and his exhaustion is apparent in a letter to a North Carolina friend,

in which he mentioned "a *New Yorker* Profile that I've been working on for what seems like the last three hundred years."

The family business required that Mitchell spend more time in Fairmont in the 1970s and '80s, but he continued to show up at his *New Yorker* office every morning when he was in town. Staffers would hear him typing away in his office, and their fascination reached the point where some would rummage through Mitchell's trash can at the end of the day, in search of manuscript pages. Oddly, the standard answer to the question of why Mitchell stopped writing—that he was Joe Gould—was suggested by Stanley Edgar Hyman way back in 1965: "We realize that Gould has been Mitchell all along, a misfit in a community of traditional occupations, statuses, and roles, come to New York to express his special identity." And Mitchell spoke freely about his relationship to Gould in a 1988 interview with the scholar Norman Sims. "To me a very tragic thing [about the Joe Gould profiles] is the story of so many people who bit off more than they could chew—and I'm one of them, you know.... Because he is me." The difference between Mitchell and Gould, of course, is that the former died with a substantial body of work in which the latter exists only as a character.

One learns more about why Mitchell was unable to write from Janet Groth, a professor of English who became Mitchell's confidante while a receptionist at *The New Yorker* in the late '60s and early '70s. Each week the two would take a long lunch at what remained of Mitchell's favorite restaurants, discussing the writers they admired, like Joyce and Kafka. As they became closer, Mitchell told her more about the big book. "He told me...he had been trying to write for years—weaving into a seamless whole the passing of the old South, symbolized in the death of his father, and the passing of the old port-and-market New York." Kunkel tells us that Mitchell decided to make himself the book's protagonist, but Groth makes it clear that he was, finally, too much the self-effacing reporter to adopt the first-person voice that the New Journalists were experimenting with (and which he loathed), much less the confessional, first-person voice that publications like *The Village Voice* would give legitimacy in the '70s. But if he didn't use himself as a literary character, who, then, would carry such a sprawling, ambitious story? "Oh, Joe, what a cross you constructed for yourself, and how you crucified yourself upon it!" Groth writes. "It was as if Joyce had tried to write a day in Dublin and a day in Trieste." ■

Tangerine Dreamers

by STUART KLAWANS

As the summer's usual dinosaurs crash and lumber across the mass market—I don't judge, I merely describe—while unobtrusive little creatures called “indie” and “foreign” skitter for nourishment in the cultural underbrush, I have to wonder: Would the characters in Sean Baker's *Tangerine* choose to watch their own little neorealist movie, or would they rather see *Jurassic World*?

I know what I'm supposed to say: People from underrepresented communities—in this case, impoverished transgender sex workers of African and Latin background—long to see themselves on the screen. Maybe so; but just the number of syllables in that answer makes me wonder how far it's true. Would *Tangerine*'s Sin-Dee and Alexandra really want to watch themselves scuffling bravely on the sidewalks of Los Angeles, or would they prefer to have movie avatars who wrangle velociraptors? It's also standard to say that cinema is richer and more vital for incorporating characters such as those in *Tangerine*—but richer and more vital for whom? The usual art-house audience—or all the trans sex workers who get their film recommendations from *The Nation*?

Such questions have knocked around ever since the hero of *Sullivan's Travels* went out to make films for the poor and disenfranchised, only to learn that his target audience wanted Disney cartoons. Now, like a chronic rash, the dilemma he faced becomes aggravated every summer, and there is no salve. I can only hope that Sin-Dee and Alexandra won't be as bored as I was if they pop into *Jurassic World*. And if someone should entice them into *Tangerine*, or one of the summer's other small movies, I hope they'll find there's fun to be had.

In *Tangerine*, the pleasures begin with an act of sharing. It's Christmas Eve in Los Angeles—a time for good will toward men, including men who have become women and work the streets—and so it's fitting that Sin-Dee (Kitana Kiki Rodriguez), just released from a month in jail, should set off the action by spending her last \$2 on a doughnut to divide with Alexandra (Mya Taylor), the only friend who showed up to greet her. The two sit chatting on opposite sides of a booth in Donut Time, Sin-Dee with her fluffy blond Beyoncé wig and leopard-print blouse, Alexandra with her curtain of silky black hair and tank top stretched over recently enhanced breasts,

while writer-director-cinematographer-editor Sean Baker shows them in alternation. It isn't yet clear, though the reason will emerge, why he's using such a rudimentary ping-pong editing scheme. What matters is that in each shot, a broad sweep of sidewalk and intersection is visible through the window, in surprisingly deep focus. The life of the streets, at a morning hour that's a little early for these two, is already present in *Tangerine*; and the streets are where the action is headed, in fury, after Alexandra lets slip the information that Sin-Dee's boyfriend (or pimp, some would say) has been unfaithful to her with one of his new girls.

To Sin-Dee, there is nothing funny about her pursuit of vengeance, which takes her on a tour of some of the more pungent neighborhoods of LA throughout a long day and into the night. (It's telling how well the shop signs and billboards suit her mood: COLLISION CENTER. URGENT CARE.) Alexandra, on the other hand, thinks her friend is being ridiculous—an opinion that distances *Tangerine* from Sin-Dee just enough to permit you to laugh at the more absurd details of her adventures without losing empathy. The mood is buoyed as well by Rodriguez's winning performance—her legs driving like a sprinter's in patterned stockings and white hot pants, her voice jammed up her nose like Minnie Mouse's even as she declares a very credible rage—while the scenes bounce along with the on-the-fly camera work. The reason behind that simplified editing at the start? Baker and his co-cinematographer, Radium Cheung, shot the entire movie on smartphones. Although this poverty-ethic decision may have limited some of their choices, it still enabled them to capture an extraordinary range of images—from a bleached tracking shot of a sidewalk at noon, to a color-saturated close-up of Alexandra singing wistfully onstage in a bar, to a Stan Brakhage-like explosion of gestural abstraction during a sexual transaction in a car wash—all the while staying as close as a pulse to the performers.

I don't know whether a real-life Sin-Dee and Alexandra would approve of the way they're presented in *Tangerine*. But I think they might appreciate the dignity these characters award themselves (knowing that nobody else is going to grant it to them anyway) and the ambiguity they're sometimes allowed. (Why does Alexandra rat out Sin-Dee's pimp? Baker leaves you guessing: Was it mere inadvertence, or did she have a purpose?) Most of all, I think

the characters might like to see how fellow feeling is restored at the end. Alexandra and Sin-Dee may be stuck at a laundromat in the early hours of Christmas, both of them broke and neither looking as glamorous as they might like, but they've still got each other. Comfort and joy.

Go from low-rent Los Angeles to the outlying districts of Mumbai, change the proudly assertive outcasts from transsexuals to Dalits, and you've got the beginnings of Chaitanya Tamhane's astonishing *Court*, another film to ride into current view on the long tail of neorealism. *Court* is beautifully composed in crisp and consistent wide-screen images, rather than ingenious grab-and-go cinematography; its rhythms are calm (to ironic effect) rather than comically frenetic; and its social portraiture is more varied than *Tangerine*'s, encompassing viewpoints from several different strata of Mumbai. But *Court*, too, measures the distance between ordinary life and the lavishness of pop culture. Some of the characters (notably the most privileged) live in a bubble of Bollywood songs. The character who sets off the action, by contrast, adheres to traditional Indian music. He teaches it, promotes it, and is likely to die in jail for having performed it on the street.

Narayan Kamble, “the people's poet,” played by the magnificent nonprofessional Vira Sathidar, has been arrested (again) for declaiming his protest verses in the slums, on an improvised stage. This time, the charge is grave: He is accused of having incited a sewer worker to commit suicide. Has he in fact written a song advising sewer workers that their only way out is to kill themselves? “Not yet,” he drily tells his questioners, “but I wouldn't mind doing it.” Despite this critical gap in his oeuvre, and the absence of any evidence that the sewer worker in question died by his own hand, the state bears down on Kamble with its full prosecutorial apparatus—suborned witnesses, Victorian-era statutes, hallucinatory police reports, impenetrable multilingual jargon—which it does very, very slowly. Month after month, Kamble wastes away in prison (bail being unthinkable for such a serious offense) while his attorney (Vivek Gomber) trudges from court date to court date, sighing with dismay, incredulity, and a carefully maintained pretense of deference.

With a poise that's rare in directors making their first feature, Tamhane delivers both a deadpan satire of a rotten legal system and a nuanced portrayal of the people who inhabit it. Most of the time, he follows the defense lawyer, a marvelously hopeless figure who is as honorable and intelligent as he is portly,

lonely, habituated to middle-class ease, and put upon by his parents. (It is characteristic of *Court's* sense of humor, or despair, that when the lawyer addresses a human-rights conference, his speech is interrupted so that workmen can install a fan on the dais.) But Tamhane also spares time for the lawyer's opponents: the prosecutor (Geetanjali Kulkarni), who has to pull dinner together for her demanding family after a long day of persecuting Dalits, and the judge (Pradeep Joshi), whose luxurious vacation and unthinking, self-satisfied cruelty are the subject of the film's final scenes.

The judge likes Bollywood tunes. The defense attorney listens to Mozart, hard bop, and cabaret-style bossa nova. The widow of the sewer worker (played by Usha Bane, who in real life is the widow of a sewer worker) doesn't seem to notice music—not even Kamble's folk-based protest songs, which she must have heard but can't remember. Nor does she have patience for the lawyer's well-intentioned offer of a little cash. She won't accept his money, she says—but if he knows of a job, any job at all, she'll take it.

There's pop culture, and then there's high pop: Kurt Weill's songs, Alfred Hitchcock's films, and now *Phoenix* by Christian Petzold. The intensely thoughtful director of *Yella*, *Jerichow*, and *Barbara* has returned with his favorite actress, Nina Hoss, for another of their immaculately realized dramas of psychological suspense and social culpability, this time venturing deep into Fassbinder territory: the ruins of Berlin just after World War II, and the ghosts of old songs and movies.

Cowritten by Petzold and the late Harun Farocki, *Phoenix* adopts quasi-melodramatic means to confront a subject that films have seldom addressed: the experience of the surviving Jews in Germany after the Holocaust. Rescued from a death camp at the war's end, her face shattered by bullets, Nelly (Hoss) undergoes reconstructive surgery at a Berlin hospital so that outwardly she becomes an approximation of what she used to be. Inwardly, she feels she won't be herself again until she is reunited with her husband, Johnny (Ronald Zehrfeld), a non-Jew with whom she used to perform in cabarets before the Nazis drove her into hiding. Trembling and unsteady, Nelly searches the nightclubs in the American sector until she stumbles upon Johnny. But he's no longer the piano player she remembers. He now works as a waiter while pimping on the side—and he fails to recognize her.



Mya Taylor (left) and Kitana Kiki Rodriguez in *Tangerine*.

Johnny thinks he has a use, though, for this fragile woman who has straggled in. If he can teach her to impersonate his wife, Nelly—dead now, he explains—she will be able to claim a substantial sum of money, a little of which he'll be willing to split with her. Heartbroken, utterly alone, and still desperately in love with the rat, Nelly moves into Johnny's basement apartment and begins to play along, pretending to learn from him how to turn herself back into herself.

It's like watching *Vertigo* told from Kim Novak's point of view, with this difference: Nelly is stubbornly trying to return to an identity that can no longer exist, now that the world that supported it has been blown apart. This is one of the better uses I've seen for the now-pervasive *Vertigo* trope, not only because it allows Hoss (an infinitely resourceful actor) to transform herself little by little before your eyes, but because a willingness to believe in illusions is central to the historical subject matter of *Phoenix*. Don't bother to make up stories about a death camp, Johnny advises Nelly (failing to realize that she's made up nothing). Nobody wants to hear all that, or see you step off a train looking ragged and starved. Just come back like the Nelly they remember, and everyone will be satisfied.

The hell of it is, he's right. But at the devastating conclusion, a snatch of pop music—Nelly's favorite tune from her cabaret days, Kurt Weill's "Speak Low"—reveals that the self she has recovered is not the one she used to be. It's a payoff that Hitchcock himself might have envied: the moment when Nelly fades out of focus, just as Johnny opens his eyes.

As for the artists who create pop culture, the summer has brought us strong documentaries about three of them. Each film is fascinatingly different in method and materials, but all have the same story arc: the pain of a youth spent where no one expects to find genius, the exhilaration of mastery and a rising career, and the slide, shockingly fast or agonizingly slow, into breakdown.

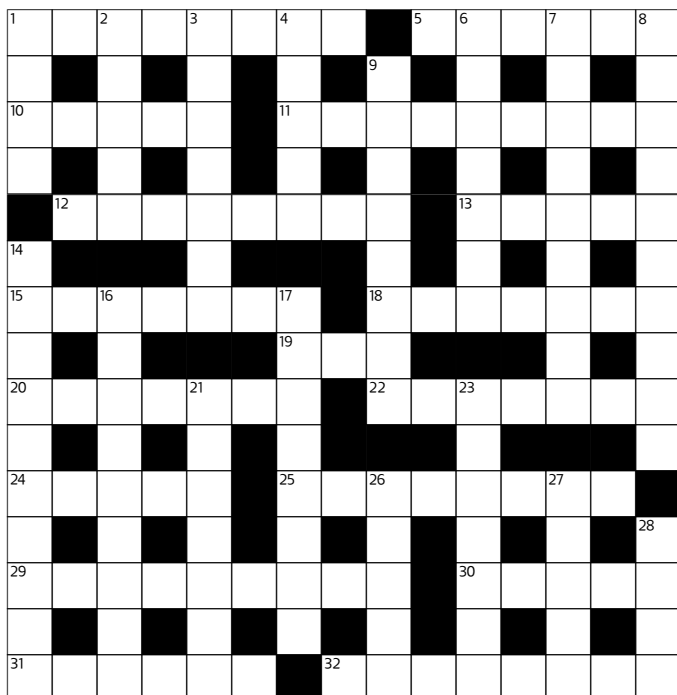
Liz Garbus's *What Happened, Miss Simone?* is perhaps the most conventional of the three in its weaving together of talking-head interviews, old photos, and archival footage. But the weaving is excellent; and because the subject is Nina Simone—electrifying in performance, fiery in activism—Garbus also gives you by far the densest, most compelling intersection, in any of these films, of personal experience and public issues.

Asif Kapadia's *Amy*, on the brief and troubled life of Amy Winehouse, lacks any political dimension but is heartbreaking for all that, and at times enraging. Its distinguishing feature is its comprehensiveness: Because video cameras had become ubiquitous by the time Winehouse was out of the cradle, it seems as if almost everything she did was recorded, from the moment she sang "Happy Birthday" to a teenage friend (and a voice bigger than her body came roaring out) to the morning she was carried dead from her house. Kapadia has assembled it all, revealing a Winehouse who seems shocking not for her addictions (so eagerly reported, so shamefully mocked) but for a lifelong ingenueness.

Perhaps oddest of all is Stevan Riley's *Listen to Me Marlon*, an impressionistic portrait of Marlon Brando that approaches the condition of autobiography, having been drawn from a previously unheard trove of audiotapes the actor recorded for purposes of self-documentation and self-hypnosis. The only voice-over in the film is Brando's—soothing himself, reminiscing, analyzing, justifying. The images, arranged more thematically than chronologically, mix broadcast interviews and excerpts from his best-known films with documentary footage, including scenes of the civil-rights struggles he joined. There is also a computer-generated head of Brando—it's based on a digital scan of his features made in the 1980s—that recites "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow" while pixelated hair flows and dissolves in a cybernetic wind. All is vanity, you might think, except for the performances he left behind. ■

Puzzle No. 3369

JOSHUA KOSMAN AND HENRI PICCIOTTO



ACROSS

- 1 Burn coats off back in worker's platform (8)
- 5 Pertaining to an ancient system of enmity? (6)
- 10 Sign and leave after six runs (5)
- 11 Does my pun upset Lewis Carroll, for instance? (9)
- 12 Poured water on blemish, with father turning over in bed (8)
- 13 Went after last piece of shoe leather (5)
- 15 With nothing left inside, cut out (7)
- 18 Baseball organization to interpret end of play so soon? (7)
- 19 Fanny doesn't finish a drink (3)
- 20 Tailless ape, 27, is a monster... (7)
- 22 ...in a tree around mid-January (7)
- 24 Groups of players in California streets (5)
- 25 Sheltered individual who is likely to regale you at awkward and tedious length about trivial details of his or her everyday life invested in firm (8)
- 29 Capital prosecutor is captivated by uninteresting ruminant (9)
- 30 Island with a charge (5)

- 31 Controlling disfigured giant grabbing man's head (6)
- 32 In public, he redistributed good stock (4,4)

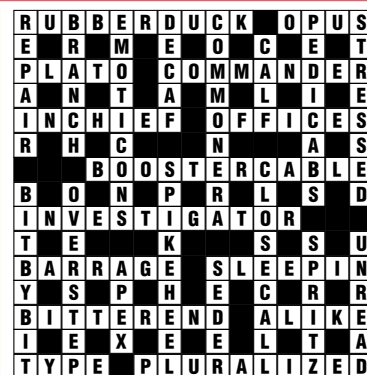
DOWN

- 1 Second Avenue bar (4)
- 2 Nothing is found in craft (a vessel) (5)
- 3 Direct Howard to enter disorderly flat (7)
- 4 Overtake Arizona city (2,3)
- 6 Change ensured for consumer (3,4)
- 7 Eerie canal held a Charleston venue, perhaps (5,4)
- 8 Where to find wood and grease applied around dark brown masonry, ultimately (10)
- 9 Engineer had ample gear for a miner (8)
- 14 Edward, to serve well, crowns upwardly mobile ditz (5,5)
- 16 Uncovered idea for downfall (9)
- 17 Old money's pathetic, sad charm (8)
- 21 Excellent, like a seabird toward sunrise (7)
- 23 Gas? That sounds sadistic (7)
- 26 Play organ reflectively, showing off for the king (5)
- 27 Period of time to manage rising hydrogen (5)
- 28 Go crazy with false insolence (4)

SOLUTION TO PUZZLE NO. 3368

ACROSS 1 RUBBER + DUCK 6 anag.
10 rev. hidden 11 & 12 anag. 13 OFF +
ICES 14 BOOS + TERCABLE (*brucelet*
anag.) 19 IN(VE)STIGATOR 22 BAR
RAGE 24 SLEE + PIN (rev.)
25 BITTE + REND 26 AL + IKE
27 hidden 28 anag.

DOWN 1 REP AIR 2 B RANCH
3 anag. 4 rev. 5 COMMONER + A
7 anag. 8 rev. 9 2 defs. 15 SPI(KE +
HE)EL 16 2 defs. 17 BIT(BY)BIT
18 OVERST (anag.) + EP 20 SP(R)ITZ
21 UNRE (anag.) + AD 23 APE + X
24 hidden



Kosman and Picciotto explain "How to Work *The Nation's* Cryptic Puzzles" at thenation.com/puzzle-rules.

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Achieving Domestic Equity



On June 26, 2015, the Supreme Court reaffirmed what many of us have long believed—the Constitution is a living, breathing document built on a foundation of equality and the pursuit of happiness. It did not take a constitutional amendment to establish marriage equality, because those concepts are embedded in our nation's founding documents.

The struggle for that important achievement was carried out over many years, from the streets, to the court rooms, to the board rooms.

We were pleased to join 379 employers and employer organizations in a friend of the court (*amicus curiae*) brief to the US Supreme Court to explain how discriminatory restrictions on the right to marry hurt business. According to the Court:

“As more than 100 amici make clear in their filings, many of the central institutions in American life—state and local governments, the military, **large and small businesses**, labor unions, religious organizations, law enforcement, civic groups, professional organizations, and universities—have devoted substantial attention to the question. **This has led to an enhanced understanding of the issue**—an understanding reflected in the arguments now presented for resolution as a matter of constitutional law.” *Obergefell v. Hodges*, Slip Op. at 23 (*emphasis added*).

Some of the largest publicly traded corporations in the world signed that brief, demonstrating that this issue had already been settled in the mainstream business community. By 2012, the vast majority of Fortune 500 companies prohibited workplace discrimination based on sexual orientation, setting a higher standard than the law required.

That didn't happen by accident. Much of it happened, company by company, due to the hard work of investors who believe that discrimination is bad for business. Companies were persuaded through letters from their shareholders, face to face meetings and the submission of shareholder proposals that were put to a vote at company annual meetings across the country. Some of these dialogues took years to achieve success.

The **Domini Social Equity Fund** played a small part in these efforts, convincing several companies to amend their non-discrimination policies to include “sexual orientation,” and voting for shareholder proposals submitted by others. A small change brought about by your mutual fund can have ripple effects throughout society.

This work helped to lay the groundwork for marriage equality by changing perceptions in the investor and business communities, strengthening the notion that an employee's sexual orientation or gender identity has nothing to do with their ability to perform on the job. We explained that corporations would benefit by greater employee loyalty and commitment. They would also gain the ability to recruit from the broadest possible pool of talent.

In the world of finance, the phrase “domestic equity” does not refer to marriage equality, it refers to the stock of American companies. But the word “equity” has a double-meaning. After all, a system that is fundamentally unfair is also not good for business in the long run.

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